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Recidivism and Rehabilitation: The Effectiveness of In-Prison Rehabilitation Programs in Reducing Recidivism Rates in California

As of June 2024, California had an adult prison population of 89,898, exceeding its institutional design capacity of 75,526 by 119%.¹ In addition to this, the state annually spends about \$15 billion on its prisons and jails, with an average cost of over \$132,860 to imprison one adult for a year.² These numbers have been steadily climbing, with the average amount of money spent on one inmate having increased by over 90% in the past decade, and the Governor's most recent budget proposal including \$18 billion for the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.³ One of the leading causes of California's longstanding prison overcapacity problem is recidivism, or the tendency for offenders to re-engage in criminal behavior. While recidivism has been declining in California for a number of reasons, the most notable of which include Proposition 47 (2014) and COVID-19, the state's recidivism rate currently remains at about 41.9% (Fiscal Year 2018-2019),⁴ highlighting the ongoing challenge of keeping people out of prison.

¹ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, "Three-Judge Court Quarterly Update," June 2024, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/3-judge-court-update/#:~:text=As%20of%20June%205%2C%202024.with%20the%20137.5%20percent%20benchmark>.

² Kristen Hwang and Nigel Duara, "As California closes prisons, the cost of locking someone up hits new record at \$132,860," *CalMatters*, January 2024, <https://calmatters.org/justice/2024/01/california-prison-cost-per-inmate/#:~:text=Locking%20up%20a%20California%20state.prison%20guards%20and%20other%20workers>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, "CDCR Recidivism Report Finds Recidivism Rates Drop - News Releases," February 2024, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2024/02/13/cdcr-recidivism-report-finds-recidivism-rates-drop-2/#:~:text=SACRAMENTO%20%E2%80%93%20The%20California%20Department%20of,previous%20year%2C%20to%2041.9%20percent>.

Given these facts and numbers, there has been a push from some lawmakers and prison advocates to shift the state's focus toward rehabilitation in order to reduce recidivism. Studies show that lack of employment opportunities, access to resources, and pathways to societal reintegration are the main contributors to recidivism, and consequently high prison populations and correctional expenditures.⁵ As such, the recidivism crisis must be addressed through examining the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation programs in reducing recidivism and identifying what works or may still be needed going forward.

Broadly, I pose the question of how effective rehabilitation programs are in reducing recidivism. Specifically, I question how effective educational, vocational training, and re-entry programs in state prisons have been in reducing recidivism across different counties in California. To answer this question, I analyze the relationship between the average number of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs across 18 counties in California and the recidivism rate of the corresponding county in the 2018-2019 fiscal year. I find that rehabilitation programs appear to be somewhat successful, or at least promising, in reducing recidivism rates, and I conclude with a discussion of how these findings inform the need to further improve and expand upon rehabilitation programs to more effectively reduce recidivism rates.

Context and Significance

Recidivism has historically been a complex, obstinate issue in the state of California, serving as one of the primary reasons for prison overcrowding and substantial state spending on corrections. With that being said, data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has shown that recidivism in California has actually been decreasing. The CDCR's

⁵ Lockwood et al., "Racial Disparities and Similarities in Post-Release Recidivism," *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, June 2015, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148844.pdf>.

latest recidivism report from fiscal year 2018-2019 showed a 2.7% decline from the previous year.⁶ This decline in recidivism can be attributed to a variety of factors, the most influential of which being the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily reduced prison intake and expedited releases from prison in order to decrease prisoner mortality rates⁷, and criminal justice reforms such as Proposition 47 (2014), which reduced some felonies to misdemeanors.⁸

In addition to these factors, the passage of Proposition 57 in 2016 further reduced recidivism rates in California. Prop 57, also known as the Public Safety and Rehabilitation Act, went into effect in May 2017 and was further expanded upon in May 2021, making it the most recent and comprehensive prisoner rehabilitation initiative enacted by the state to date. The proposition incentivized incarcerated individuals to participate in rehabilitation programs by providing credits for those who participated in these programs and sustained good behavior. These credits, which were divided into Good Conduct, Milestone Completion, Rehabilitative Achievement, and Educational Merit, allowed inmates to receive parole consideration and reduce their sentences sooner.⁹ Several years after the implementation of Prop 57, the CDCR found that individuals who earned Rehabilitative Achievement and Educational Merit credits had notably lower recidivism rates than those who did not receive these credits,¹⁰ demonstrating the promising capacity for rehabilitation opportunities to reduce recidivism.

⁶ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2024/02/13/cdcr-recidivism-report-finds-recidivism-rates-drop-2/#:~:text=SACRAMENTO%20%E2%80%93%20The%20California%20Department%20of,previous%20year%2C%20to%2041.9%20percent>.

⁷ Camille Kramer et al., “Release, Reentry, and Reintegration During COVID-19,” *Health Equity*, July 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10354726/>.

⁸ National Institute of Justice, “The Impact of California’s Proposition 47 (The Reduced Penalties for Some Crimes Initiative) on Recidivism,” November 2021, <https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/740>.

⁹ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “In-Prison Credit-Earning Opportunities,” <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/proposition57/#:~:text=Under%20Proposition%2057%2C%20incarcerated%20people,Credits%2C%20and%20Educational%20Merit%20Credits>.

¹⁰ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “Recidivism Report for Offenders Released from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in Fiscal Year 2018-19,” February 2024, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2024/02/Statewide-Recidivism-Report-for-Individuals-Released-in-Fiscal-Year-2018-19.pdf>.

Though California's numerous measures in recent years to reform the carceral system appear to have been successful, at least to some degree, the state's recidivism rate still remains at approximately 41.9%.¹¹ In other words, nearly half of the state's prison population is likely to reoffend and return to prison due to a number of different factors. Continuous recidivism and high inmate populations not only pose an ongoing strain to the state and its taxpayers, who contribute billions of dollars each year to operate state correctional facilities,¹² but also demonstrate an inherent failure of the state's prison system in effectively reintegrating criminal offenders into society. Overall, these statistics show that California's existing rehabilitation programs and policies have considerable potential for improvement, which can be achieved by evaluating the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation programs in reducing recidivism and determining how they can be further improved.

Literature Review

Considerable research has been published on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs in reducing recidivism. The report "Improving In-Prison Rehabilitation Programs" (2017), which was published by the the California Legislative Analyst's Office, a nonpartisan government agency that provides policy advice to the California Legislature, states that rehabilitation programs are "generally effective" at reducing recidivism as long as they possess three key principles. These principles include being "evidence based," meaning modeled after a program shown to actually reduce recidivism and operate in the same manner, "evaluated for

¹¹ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2024/02/13/cdcr-recidivism-report-finds-recidivism-rates-drop-2/#:~:text=SACRAMENTO%20%E2%80%93%20The%20California%20Department%20of,previous%20year%2C%20to%2041.9%20percent>.

¹² CalMatters, <https://calmatters.org/justice/2024/01/california-prison-cost-per-inmate/#:~:text=Locking%20up%20a%20California%20state,prison%20guards%20and%20other%20workers>.

cost-effectiveness,” and “focused on the highest-risk and highest-need inmates.”¹³ According to the report, rehabilitation programs require these core components to reduce recidivism.¹⁴

In addition to the consensus that rehabilitation programs are promising in reducing recidivism, there have also been studies calling for a need to shift the function, culture, and public perception of prisons from being places of punishment to places of rehabilitation instead. The article “Inside of a Prison: How a Culture of Punishment Prevents Rehabilitation” (2022) attributes stubbornly high recidivism rates in the United States to an inherent failure of prison rehabilitation, which stems from the prevailing philosophy of punishment in prisons. Research shows that this mindset exacerbates fear, anger, aggression, proclivities toward depression, and suicide in prisoners,¹⁵ underscoring the need for prisons to be more rehabilitative in nature. Studies also acknowledge the complexity and challenges of recidivism as a whole, recognizing that those who are susceptible to reoffending are influenced by a variety of factors and do so for a variety of reasons. In particular, the article “Racial Disparities and Similarities in Post-Release Recidivism and Employment among Ex-Prisoners with a Different Level of Education” (2015) finds that post-release employment and level of education are some of the most influential predictors of recidivism among ex-prisoners.¹⁶ This claim further supports the importance of academic and career-focused rehabilitation programs in prisons to help reduce recidivism.

Finally, the Public Policy Institute of California has published an abundance of data on recidivism and rehabilitation in California. Their report “Recidivism of Felony Offenders in California” (2019) summarizes the current state of recidivism in California and notes several

¹³ The LAO defines “high-risk” and “high-need” inmates as those who are at highest risk or recidivating and thus have the highest need for rehabilitation programs to address those needs.

¹⁴ Jonathan Peterson and Anita Lee, “Improving In-Prison Rehabilitation Programs,” California Legislative Analyst’s Office, December 2017, <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3720>.

¹⁵ Tina Bloom and G. A. Bradshaw, “Inside of a Prison: How a Culture of Punishment Prevents Rehabilitation,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000572>.

¹⁶ Lockwood et al., “Racial Disparities and Similarities in Post-Release Recidivism,” <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148844.pdf>.

important findings, such as the fact that overall recidivism rates have declined for felony offenders, and that recidivism is likely related to multiple factors, such as lack of resources and economic opportunities, mental health issues, and substance abuse.¹⁷ In regards to rehabilitation, the PPIC's report "California Prison Programs and Reentry Pathways" (2024) examines how effectively the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has delivered education, employment, and rehabilitative programs to individuals released from prison between the years 2015-2019 by assessing program participation and mapping underlying trends in recidivism outcomes. Following these rehabilitation initiatives, the report finds that recidivism rates are lower than before 2015, but still remain high- over half of those with prior prison histories and 43% of first-time offenders were rearrested for felonies.¹⁸ Together, these reports reflect that the state is increasingly paying more attention to combating recidivism, but existing measures to do so must still be improved.

Altogether, there is a reasonable amount of literature on the topics of recidivism and rehabilitation, but there is not a lot of research on what types of rehabilitation programs are most effective in reducing recidivism and how existing rehabilitation programs should be improved, as most just vaguely conclude that rehabilitation programs are good to have. There is also very limited data on recidivism and rehabilitation programs in California as a whole, making it difficult to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of existing programs in detail. Thus, through my research, I make an effort to more closely examine the current state of prison rehabilitation in California, address where programs have succeeded or fallen short, and discuss how they can be improved in the future.

¹⁷ Mia Bird, Justin Goss, and Viet Nguyen, "Recidivism of Felony Offenders in California," Public Policy Institute of California, June 2019, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/recidivism-of-felony-offenders-in-california/>.

¹⁸ Heather Harris, Brandon Martin, Sean Cremin, "California Prison Programs and Reentry Pathways." Public Policy Institute of California, June 2024, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/california-prison-programs-and-reentry-pathways/#:~:text=Employment%20programs%20include%20career%20technical,improving%20relationships%2C%20and%20understanding%20victims.>

Theory, Hypothesis, and Causal Mechanism

I hypothesize that rehabilitation programs help reduce recidivism. More specifically, I believe that state prisons with greater enrollment numbers in educational, vocational training, and re-entry programs will have lower recidivism rates in their counties. This is because lack of employment opportunities, access to resources, and pathways for societal reintegration are the leading causes of recidivism for individuals released from prison. Following the latest recidivism report by the CDCR, there is evidence that existing rehabilitation programs in California have reduced recidivism by a small margin.¹⁹ As such, investing greater funds and resources into rehabilitation programs and increasing prisoner participation in them will further reduce recidivism.

Research Design and Methods

To determine whether there is a relationship between rehabilitation programs and recidivism, I investigate whether the average number of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs per county impacts the recidivism rate of that county. In order to accomplish this, I analyze the average number of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs across 32 prisons, which span across 18 counties in California. There are a total of 33 prisons in California, but I exclude High Desert State Prison because no recidivism data is available for Lassen County. To measure recidivism rates of these 18 counties, I utilize the latest recidivism report published by the CDCR, which accounts for the recidivism rates of 36,086 individuals released from state prisons during the fiscal year 2018-2019; about two years after the passage of Proposition 57.²⁰ Since the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Since the temporal scope of my research takes place several years after the implementation of Prop 57, it is important to note that the proposition's incentivization system for prisoners to participate in rehabilitation programs likely increased program enrollment numbers.

fiscal year spans from mid-2018 to mid-2019, the data for both program enrollment numbers and prison population sizes is taken from January 2019 to represent the midpoint of this period.

The independent variable (X) in my analysis is the average number of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs per county, anchored on the size of the county's prison population. For each prison, "program enrollment" can be defined as the sum of the actual enrollment numbers of three types of rehabilitation programs- Academic Education, Career Technical Education, and Re-Entry Hub Programs. These are the three main types of rehabilitation programs all prisons in California offer that focus on education, vocational training, and societal reintegration, which is why I use total enrollment in these programs across counties to quantify inmate participation in rehabilitation programs. For counties with more than one prison, the total enrollment in these three programs is averaged across all prisons in that county. Furthermore, all prisons in California have different population sizes, so I account for this discrepancy in my averaging calculation as well. The equation I use to calculate average program enrollment for each county is as follows:

$$\text{enrollment of prison 1} \cdot \text{weight} + \text{enrollment of prison 2} \dots$$

$$\text{weight} = \text{population of prison 1} / \text{population of all prisons in county}$$

The data to calculate program enrollment numbers is taken from the Statistical Reports (SB601)²¹ of each prison in California, which are available on each prison's website.

The dependent variable (Y) is the recidivism rate of each county. Recidivism data is taken from the CDCR,²² who provides recidivism statistics for every fiscal year.²³ The CDCR primarily

²¹ California Department of Corrections of Rehabilitation, Prison Statistical Reports, Fiscal Year 2018-2019, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/statistical-reports-sb601/>.

²² California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2024/02/Statewide-Recidivism-Report-for-Individuals-Released-in-Fiscal-Year-2018-19.pdf>.

²³ The CDCR stopped reporting recidivism after the COVID-19 pandemic because it permanently misconstrued recidivism rates.

measures recidivism rates as the percentage of individuals by county who recidivate within three years of release from prison,²⁴ so I similarly use this scale for my analysis.

In examining the relationship between program enrollment numbers and recidivism rates, I also account for two control variables that may influence the relationship between the X and Y variables- gender and level of funding. Most prisons in California are only male, but some are only female or mixed gender. The gender composition of prisons may influence enrollment rates in rehabilitation programs if one gender is more likely to enroll in programs over the other, or the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs in reducing recidivism if some program models are more tailored toward male or female inmates. I will thus take note of whether a prison is male-only, female-only, or both genders in my analysis, as this information can be found on each prison's inmate population summary. Additionally, the amount of money prisons spend on each inmate may also influence the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs in reducing recidivism. Prisons that spend more money on their inmates, and thus programs, likely have better outcomes in reducing recidivism due to better quality of programs, availability of resources, and so forth. For this reason, I will examine whether prisons that spend greater than \$100,000 per inmate have lower recidivism rates in their counties than prisons that spend less than \$100,000 per inmate. The data on average expenditure per inmate for each prison in every fiscal year is published in the CDCR's Annual Performance Measures Report.²⁵

²⁴ Recidivism is measured by criminal acts that resulted in rearrest, reconviction, or return to incarceration with or without a new sentence following three years since the person's release. The CDCR has been measuring recidivism as a three-year rate since the Fiscal Year 2011-2012.

²⁵ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, "Annual Performance Measures Report for Fiscal Year 2018-2019," 2020, https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2020/02/CDCR-Fiscal_Year_2018-2019_Annual_Performance_Measures_Report.pdf.

To test for a relationship between my X and Y variables, I run a Pearson correlation coefficient (r) test. A Pearson's r test measures the strength of the relationship between two continuous variables, which is fitting for my analysis.

Results

After compiling data on the average number of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs per county in California, the corresponding recidivism rates of each of these counties, and running a Pearson's r test, the results indicated a correlation between rehabilitation program enrollment and recidivism.

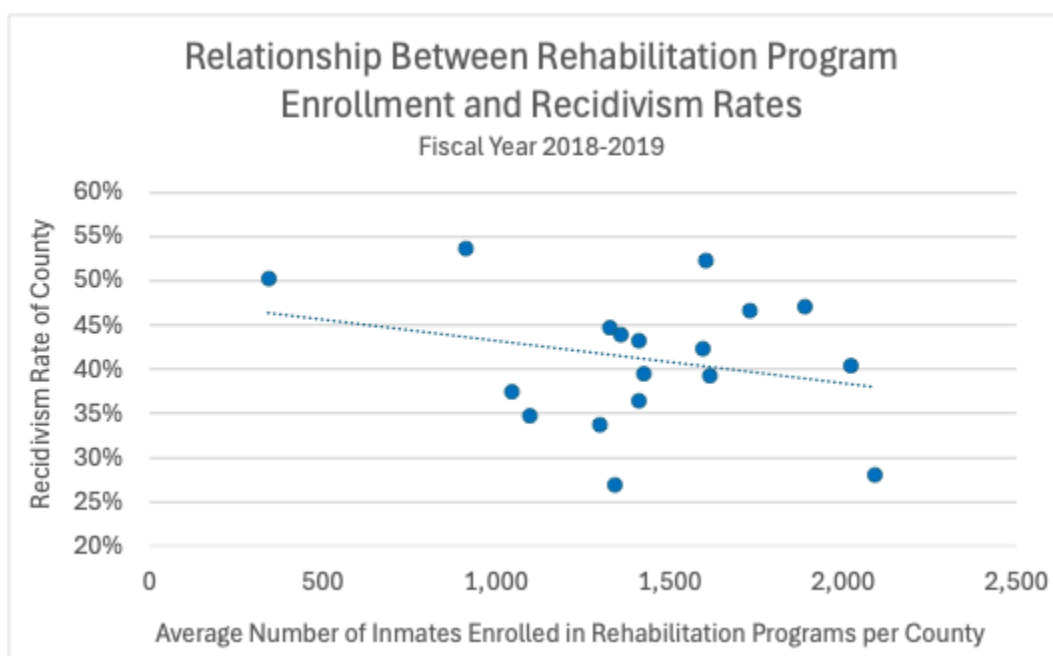


Figure 1. Relationship between Rehabilitation Program Enrollment and Recidivism Rates
(Data Sources: SB601 & CDCR)

As evidenced by Figure 1, a downward trendline can be observed, indicating a relationship between the two variables. With a correlation coefficient (r) of -0.26, there is a weak negative correlation between rehabilitation program enrollment and recidivism rates. This means that

there is slight evidence for the fact that greater inmate enrollment numbers in rehabilitation programs correspond to lower recidivism rates. In other words, the data shows that higher program enrollment numbers vaguely corresponds to lower recidivism rates. While the correlation may be minimal, it is still present, thereby supporting my hypothesis that rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism.

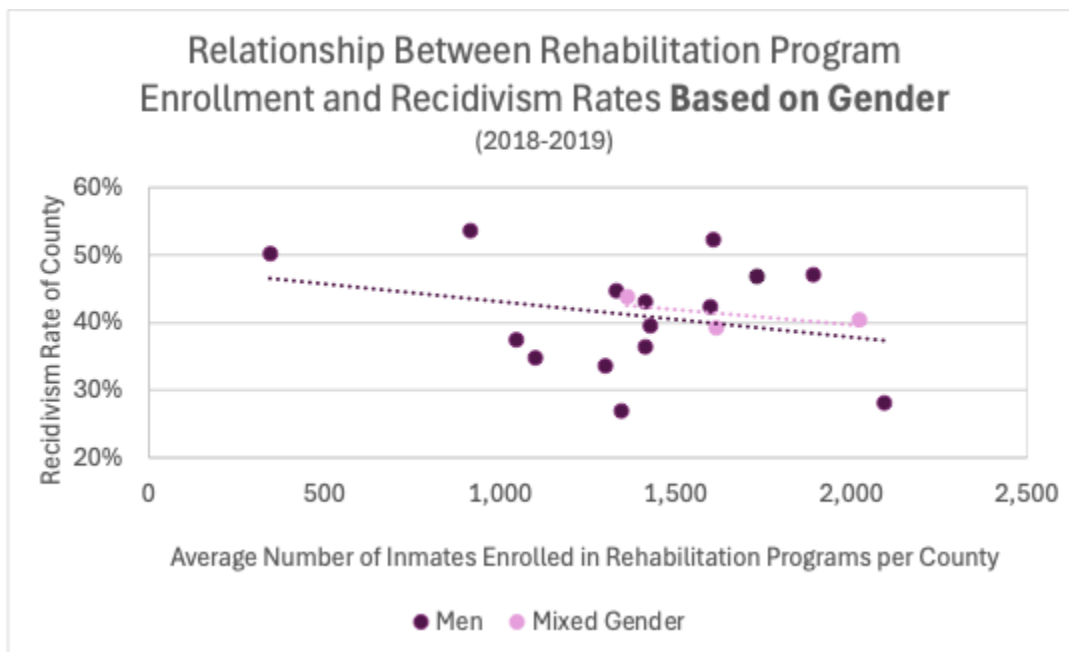


Figure 2. Relationship between Rehabilitation Program Enrollment and Recidivism Rates Comparing Counties with Male-Only Inmate Populations and Mixed Gender Inmate Populations
(Data Source: CDCR)

With the negative correlation between rehabilitation program enrollment and recidivism rates established, the r tests that control for potentially confounding variables had more ambiguous findings. Figure 2 distinguishes between counties whose prisons only have male prisoners, and counties whose prison populations are both male and female. While both groups show a negative correlation between program enrollment and recidivism similarly to the first figure, there does not appear to be a significant difference in findings between genders. With that being said, there

are only three prisons in California that have female populations- California Institution for Women in Riverside County, Central California Women’s Facility in Madera County, and Folsom State Prison in Sacramento County. Thus, it is important to note that the small sample size may have limited the quality of data that was used to make this analysis. Nonetheless, the given findings suggest that gender does not have a significant impact on program enrollment and recidivism.

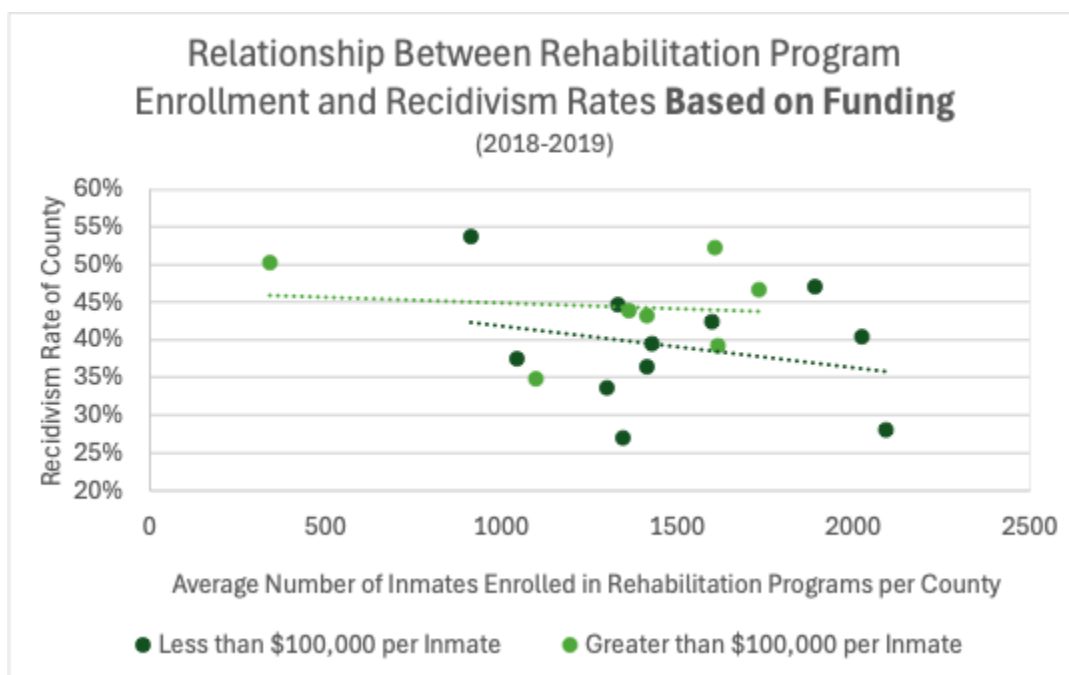


Figure 3. Relationship between Rehabilitation Program Enrollment and Recidivism Rates Comparing Counties that Spend Less or Greater than \$100,000 per Inmate on Average
(Data Source: CDCR)

On a similar note, funding does not appear to have a significant impact on program enrollment and recidivism either. Figure 3 depicts the difference between the recidivism rates of counties whose prisons spend less or greater than \$100,000 per inmate. Though both groups show a negative correlation between program enrollment and recidivism, supporting my hypothesis that

rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism, greater expenditure on inmates does not necessarily correspond to lower recidivism rates. If anything, counties whose prisons spent more than \$100,000 per inmate on average seemed to be less effective in reducing recidivism than counties whose prisons spent less than \$100,000 per inmate on average. While these findings could be attributed to the fact that very limited data on program enrollment and recidivism was available in conducting this analysis, it may also suggest that more funding does not automatically guarantee better rehabilitation programs in prisons.

Overall, the results of these analyses consistently show a negative correlation between inmate enrollment in rehabilitation programs and recidivism rates, suggesting that rehabilitation programs are effective in reducing recidivism, albeit to only a small extent.

Discussion and Research Implications

In questioning how effective rehabilitation programs are in reducing recidivism, or more specifically, how effective educational, vocational training, and re-entry programs in state prisons have been in reducing recidivism across different counties in California, it can be stated that rehabilitation programs appear to be somewhat successful, or at least promising, in reducing recidivism rates. While the correlation between program enrollment and recidivism rates was weak, it is important to note that there was still a correlation. The weakness of the correlation can likely be attributed to the poor quality and quantity of data that is available on recidivism in California and existing rehabilitation programs in state prisons not functioning at their highest potential. However, the presence of any correlation, even a minimal one, is worth noting and using as evidence for the fact that rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism. As such, more inmates need to participate in rehabilitation programs. Prop 57's credit-earning program to

incentivize prisoners to participate in rehabilitation programs is an inspiring real-world example of how successful rehabilitation efforts can be in reducing recidivism, but more initiatives need to be taken by the state to further reduce recidivism, perpetually high prison populations, and immense expenditures on corrections every year.

Moreover, existing rehabilitation programs must be improved and expanded upon, which can be accomplished through examining what makes programs effective and taking the appropriate steps to implement these measures in state prisons. One of the greatest hindrances in furthering this endeavor is the sheer lack of data on recidivism rates and research on rehabilitation programs for prisoners. For example, insufficient data and research on recidivism and rehabilitation in California is likely the reason behind the surprising findings in Figures 2 and 3, which showed that gender and funding do not appear to have a significant impact on program enrollment and recidivism. The reason for these findings was either insufficient data on recidivism, or that the design and quality of programs vary immensely from prison to prison. This is especially since greater spending on inmates does not appear to have an immediate influence on how program enrollment corresponds to recidivism, suggesting that simply increasing funding for prisons may be inconsequential if money is not used meaningfully or effectively. Therefore, in addition to increasing inmate participation in rehabilitation programs and improving existing programs, there needs to be more data on recidivism rates collected and made readily available, along with greater research conducted on making programs more effective.

Research Limitations and Extensions

Aside from the limited data on recidivism rates and rehabilitation programs in California, there are various limitations in this research project to be mindful of. While I examine the relationship between inmate program enrollment numbers for counties and the corresponding recidivism rates of these counties, state prisons do not necessarily release their inmates back into the county individuals were incarcerated in. Additionally, based on the way I collected data, I was unable to predict and examine which of the three rehabilitation programs I choose to study- educational, vocational training, and re-entry programs, are most effective in reducing recidivism. If I were to do this project again, I would account for this in my hypothesis and research design, to potentially shed more light on how rehabilitation programs can be more effective in reducing recidivism. Lastly, in examining the populations of inmates enrolled in rehabilitation programs, I was unable to include demographics other than gender in my analysis as controls. Such demographics include race, type of crime committed, and so forth. This shortcoming can also be attributed to the limited data that was available on recidivism and rehabilitation programs in California.

Despite these limitations, however, my project still provides insight into the effectiveness of rehabilitation in reducing recidivism on a more broad scale. My examination into the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs in California state prisons, specifically educational, vocational training, and re-entry programs, demonstrates that higher enrollment in rehabilitation programs corresponds to lower recidivism rates. These findings underscore the importance and impact of rehabilitation in reducing recidivism, and consequently the state's prison populations and expenditures on corrections.

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