

UC Office of the President  
Student Policy Research Papers

Title

How Do the Programs within California State Prisons Affect the Recidivism Rates of California Counties?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1f59h45x>

Author

Carr, Ian

Publication Date

2024-02-06

Ian Carr

How Do the Programs within California State Prisons  
Affect the Recidivism Rates of California Counties?

**Introduction: Why Recidivism Matters.**

With a prison population just shy of two million, the United States of America has one of the largest prison populations in the world. It compares remarkably poorly to its peers, and especially nations of its type, which is to say the rest of the developed western world (World Prison Brief). California, as part of the United States, has some advantages within its system but also many flaws. California prisons remain riddled with issues both in regards to operation and outcome. For a start, its prisons were operating over their design capacity, at a rate of around 103% (CDCR). This means that overcrowding remains a serious issue within the State prisons, especially when considering the uneven spread of the overcrowding burden. Moreover, California has an average three-year recidivism rate of nearly fifty-percent (CDCR). This suggests that California prisons are inefficient, and ineffective, when it comes to preventing future crime. Recidivism is also a compounding factor to California's prison overcrowding.

To reduce recidivism rates, many prisons have invested in programs designed to reintegrate its population following the end of an inmate's sentence. However, the resources and effectiveness of these programs vary greatly even when only considering the state of California. It is thus important to see what prisons employ effective programs, and which ones do not. That is why in this paper I will be looking at the statistics of prisons and their programs, and seeing what effect they have on the recidivism rate of their local counties. This will be in the attempt to find if there is any correlation between the two, and to gauge if the current methods in place at

prisons are on the right path moving forward. Most importantly, it is to see if prison programs and funding affect recidivism rate.

**Significance: The Current Flaws of the California Prison System, as well as the American Prison System Generally.**

The larger issues pertaining to prison effectiveness, and the issues of prisons as an institution in general, are a growing point of concern within the United States. As for its current direct effects, the United States has a state and federal prison population of around 1,200,000 people. Adding over half-million people who are currently in local jails, and the United States had approximately 1,700,000 people incarcerated by the end of 2021 (Sawyer 2021). This means that, with a population of 333 million people, the United States has an incarceration rate of 531 people in prison per 100,000 members of the national population. This is very high, more than five times neighboring Canada's rate of just 88, and still nearly three times as much as Mexico's rate of 176. California's incarceration rate is 333 as of 2021, which while better than the national average, is still far off of most comparable countries (World Prison Brief).

It is important to clarify why having such a high incarceration rate is so detrimental to the United States, and to California specifically. A clear consequence of a high incarceration rate has been persistent overcrowding within prisons. Specifically for California, prisons are on average operating at 103% of design capacity (Haris). The most recent consequence of this overcrowding came during the Covid pandemic, where the cramped conditions allowed the disease to run rampant. There have so far been 95,229 confirmed cases of Covid 19 within the state prison system, which has led to there being 263 deaths from Covid (CDCR). The number of Covid cases nearly matches the number of total inmates, although it should be noted that some of the

cases were repeat illnesses. Regardless it is hardly surprising that such numbers were the case, as the conditions present in California prisons make them especially susceptible to disease.

Even when pandemics are not an issue, overcrowding can still lead to numerous other problems. Overcrowding has been seen to have a demonstrable impact on the level of violence within prisons. Violence has both the obvious immediate risks of safety and injury to the prisoners and staff, but also creates long term harms to prison effectiveness and culture. It is important to understand morale and culture within the prison system, as considerations of both can help make judgements on the effectiveness of prisons (Baggio et. al). While both are hard to quantify objectively, the consequences of the prison systems failing to meet acceptable quality standards for life within prison has resulted in many negative consequences. Mental health is becoming a larger problem within prisons, which can result in more violence (although it should be noted that the mentally unwell are more likely to be the target of violence than the perpetrator). It can also be said that these conditions are cruel and inhumane, and do not properly respect the persons that are being held within prisons.

Finally there are the costs of high incarceration. The cost per day of a federal prisoner is around one-hundred and fifteen dollars as of 2022. This results in a yearly cost per prisoner of forty-two thousand dollars (U.S. Department of Justice). Looking again at the United States prison population, it becomes obvious why the United States allocates so much money to the prison system. Recidivism is another cost of our current prison system, although it is more of a cause of the United State's high recidivism rate than a result of it (even though the two are in many ways intertwined for both cause and effect). Either way, Recidivism is by its very nature a cause of crime, and a failure of the prison systems. A prison that produces recidivists is not very effective at performing one of its key tasks, which is to prevent future crime by bringing

criminals back into society. The failure of prisons to reintegrate prisoners is one part of why California is saddled with its nearly fifty-percent three year recidivism rate.

### **Background: Past Works Regarding the Connection of Recidivism and Programs.**

The effectiveness and prevalence of prison services for inmates is often thought as being linked with recidivism rate. Countries that prioritize a rehabilitative model for their prisoners have often seen very positive effects. Norway is often seen as having the best functioning prisons in the world, due to both their incredibly humane treatment and very low recidivism rate. This combined with a fairly low crime rate makes the Norwegian systems seem very desirable to emulate. Despite the numerous amounts of available data comparing Norway and other countries to the United States, it needs to be noted that the United States is very different from many European nations. However, there have been tests of this model within the United States. Pennsylvania has started a “Norway” model prison, and so has California. California has specifically chosen San Quentin State Prison for this remodeling, and the choice was far from random given the legacy of San Quentin. However, both the Californian and Pennsylvannian projects are very recent, so definitive statistics about either are not yet available. What is known, however, is what the prisoners and staff think about the projects so far. The results are promising, with prisoners and staff reporting higher morale and comfort within the prisons as compared to others (Chabria, 2023). While this may not seem like much, and in many ways it is not much yet, there is still reason to believe that a more positive mood among prisoners can positively affect their time there. This could lead to an end result of prisoners being released in a more stable state than they are currently.

In recognition of the benefits that come from providing services to prisoners, there have been attempts made to improve the quality of care given within prisons. SB 513, a bill proposed in the California Senate during the 2023-2024 regular session, sought to improve specifically mental health care and programs for prisoners. Both the quality and most importantly accessibility of these services was a key component to how the bill would have improved life within prisons. However, the bill died on the suspense file. Programs such as this often have a high cost to start, as there is an immediate cost to building and providing services within prisons that may not exist, or do not exist in an adequate state. It is very likely the more bills of its type will continue to be proposed, however it remains to be seen which ones are deemed economically viable.

Another piece of legislation that is especially pertinent to Californian's prisons was SB 601, which was passed in 2015. It mandated that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation create a quarterly dashboard that displayed various statistics regarding the prisons under its operation. Transparency is very important when it comes to prisons, especially those funded by the public, and it may allow the general population to have a better idea of what goes on within the prisons within their counties.

### **Theory: Why Programs Would have an Impact on Recidivism Rates**

The current theory I have for California's prison system is that prisons which spend more on, and offer more in prison services will have a better recidivism rate than those that do not. There are many reasons for why I think this would be the case. For a start, looking at the most successful prison system globally, there is a strong trend to a rehabilitation model. California, and most of the United State's prisons, currently run a punitive model of justice. Their prisons

are no exception, and often it is the case that the people are sent to prison to be punished over a long set of time. However, the most successful prisons globally are rehabilitative, where prisoners are, to the best ability of their prison, given what they need to reintegrate into society. Success in this instance is having a low recidivism rate, which remains the case in rehabilitative countries like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Furthermore, the link between programs and recidivism rate seems to make intuitive sense. It is known that poverty and lack of education can lead to crime, often because both perpetuate a cycle of poverty. So if someone leaves prison with more job experience, life skills, or education than what they entered with, it seems to follow that they would be less likely to commit crime in the future. Education is often linked with job quality, which is to say that people with better education often earn more than those who do not (Tamborini). Many prisoners do not even have a highschool degree, and the rate at which prisoners do not have a highschool degree is nearly triple as much as the national average. Job programs seem the next most likely, and may even be more likely, to prevent recidivism than educational programs (Zoukis). Getting a job is a key part of being able to function in society, as without a job many people will struggle to get by. The amount of things that employment can do to prevent recidivism is immense, to just name one example there is always homelessness. Homeless people are far more likely to be involved in crime, especially mentally ill homelessness. So if a prison can provide a service that reduces the likelihood of homelessness through employment, and if it can provide ways to keep people in good mental condition, I believe it will fare very well against prisons that do not (Martell). That is why I propose that when the independent variable of prison programs increases, that the dependent variable of recidivism decreases. I think there should be a similar relationship with funding per prisoner as well, as a poorly funded program is unlikely to be as effective as a well funded one.

There are other possible explanations for why recidivism rate and programs could be connected, and perhaps there are other reasons that prevent there from being a connection at all. For a start, recidivism is calculated on a per county basis, not for the prisons individually. This means that there is a “spillover” from one county to another, where prisons in one county can create recidivists who upon completing their sentence commit crimes in another county. If this effect was great enough, then it does not matter if a county has amazing prisons, as the bulk of their recidivists would be coming from out of the county. Luckily, while an issue, there is still some connection between prison and county recidivism rate. That is largely because of the way that prison releases work, and how they have to all start at the prison from which they have left. This could also provide an opportunity to judge the services of said prison, as if someone finishes their sentence and then gets a job in the local area, it should reflect positively on that area’s recidivism rate. On the other hand, it could be that the recidivism is much more strongly related to the area than to the prisons themselves. Some places in the State of California, and the United States to an even larger degree, have more crime than others. It could be that the location of release is more impactful than anything else that happens within the prison system. Moreover, it could be that people who return to their home area after prison, may have come from a place that has a higher level of criminal activity. Both of these would suggest that what goes on inside a prison is largely irrelevant when compared to what the situation is like outside a prison. However I think there is good reason to believe that prisons do have an effect that can go beyond what local community influence can do. That said, much of what prison has shown to have done has been in regards to the negative impacts, as there is proof that there are many negative life repercussions to going to prison (CHPS). Not only is being marked as an ex-convict a hefty sentence for many employers, prisons also affect people’s mental well being and temperament.



That said these are all negatives, while looking at programs is meant to see positives, but it still could be that prisons with programs provide enough positives to outweigh the negatives which would result in a difference.

It is with these factors in mind that I propose that, as programs become more available in prisons, the recidivism rate of the counties that prison is in will decrease.

### **Research Design: A General Overview of the Utilized Method and Design**

As mentioned previously, I hypothesize that as programs become more available in prisons, the recidivism rate of the counties that prison is in will decrease. The way I planned to test this hypothesis was to take the available data of individual prisons and their program. Next I would see what county they fell into, and take note of the recidivism rate of that county. Then I would compare this combination to the prisons of a different county, while also taking some note of the differences within each county. Furthermore, this was broken down by program type. Finally, the amount of money per prisoner was also taken into account in the review, and prisons were grouped into categories that reflected how much they spend per prisoner.

### **Design: Specifics of Choice of Prison and County**

The specific counties that were looked at were: Kern, Kings, Monterey, Riverside, and Fresno. To understand why these counties were included I want to quickly mention why some were excluded. Specifically some of California's largest counties, such as Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego are excluded from this list. The reason goes back to one of the aforementioned possible problems with looking at county recidivism rate, and then trying to compare it to individual prisons. None of these counties have enough state prisons, or prison population, compared to their total population to make a valid comparison between county recidivism rate

and prison performance. Riverside does have a fairly large population, but also has more prisons. Secondly was geographic similarity. Most of California state prisons are inland, and clustered around central California. It then seemed to be a good idea to keep the selected prisons to roughly those areas, to try and minimize the geographical impact that prisons might be experiencing. The twelve prisons were picked in a similar way, and were excluded if they had specialities that would make them different from others, e.i. if it was an all men's prison or a maximum security prison, which are different enough from other prisons to exclude them from the list.

### **Design: Specifics of Measured Variables.**

As previously mentioned the dependent variable is the recidivism rate of an individual county. This was taken from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) directly, as they manage the state prisons within California. Moreover, the CDCR also provides information on the prisons themselves within a county, which is a newer addition that was made mandatory by the aforementioned SB601. The reason recidivism was used as a benchmark for effectiveness is because looking at the recidivism rate is the current best way to approximate the amount of successful reintegration that a prison produces. That is because the two concepts work as effective opposites, with reintegration being a key component in getting ex-convicts back into society. It would be preferable to see how many of the programs were directly responsible for getting prisoners hired, or for how much they affected the lives of the prisoners in a positive way after the sentence, but as of now that is not possible. There are occasionally surveys that go around in prisons that can give qualitative data on what the prisoners and staff think of the situation within the prison, but those have their own flaws. The most significant is often the non-response problem, where prisoners who do not respond to

surveys often do so because of some shared problem, such as poor mental health or low trust of the staff they are under. That is why recidivism, specifically the three year recidivism rate for convictions, will be the basis for prison performance. It is measured as a percentage of all released members that, in the timespan of three years, commit another offense. Notably this is the conviction recidivism rate, as there are also rates for returns and arrests. However, I believe that looking at convictions most closely represents how successful reintegration has been, which is why it will be the rate used.

### **Design: Prison Programs and What They Are.**

The independent variable is the number of available programs within the prisons. This is looked at on a per prisoner basis, so programs are measured as a value from zero to one. It can also be understood as a percentage of population that the programs are available for. These programs are broken up into four categories, which is slightly different from what the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation recognizes. This is because the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation looks at intensive outpatient care, and congestive behavioral intervention - sex offender. Both of which have very low numbers of members, with some prisons having zero people enrolled during a given month. The CDCR also splits education into further categories, where I looked at education generally. The programs that I looked at were from the fiscal year of 2022 until 2023. The CDCR has its fiscal year start in July and end in June of next year. The programs that were looked at were: life skills, outpatient, academic education, and career technical education. Life skills are broadly speaking the skills needed to be successful outside of prison, and can be thought of broadly as the basic cognitive tools that are required for success. This can be as basic as planning or goal setting, to more complex things such as intrapersonal interaction. Outpatient programs are those that deal with the mental well

being of prisoners. This often looks at anger management or criminal thinking. The other two programs related to more hard skills. Educational programs are those that teach academic material to prisoners. This can be topics such as mathematics or english, and often is used to substitute the lower education many prisoners lack. Finally there are career technical training programs that look to assist prisoners in getting jobs after the end of their sentence. Of these programs, I expected that career technical programs would be the most effective, as I supposed that careers would be the most likely factor in having prisoners reintegrate into society.

Looking at the programs as a whole, there does not seem to be a strong correlation between programs per prisoner and recidivism. Even when broken down by category, there does not seem to be any particular program that stands out as being especially effective at reducing the recidivism rate of a county. However, there are still some interesting connections to be made when it comes to the programs as compared to each other. For a start, the number of programs offered per prison varies significantly, and there are also differences in what programs prisons choose to invest in. Educational programs are by far the most popular, and on average there is one for every two prisoners. Given how many prisoners do not have even a highschool diploma, it is then no wonder that such programs are offered the most. Actually, the number of programs offered very nicely fits with the around 40% of state prisoners who do not have a highschool degree. Moreover, there seems to be marginally more consistency when it comes to the number of programs available between prisons. However, educational programs are not what I would consider to be the most popular. That is because the career technical programs, while not offered in as large a quantity as education, have a higher enrolment percentage than education. Lastly there are life skills and outpatient programs. Neither of which are all that frequently offered, but

life skills seem to have the strongest correlation with recidivism rates. That said, it is not possible to call the difference significant.

### **Design: Data Not Present that Would Have Otherwise Been Useful**

There is one piece of data that would be an amazing addition to this comparison. That is the fact that there is no per prison recidivism rate. It would require that prisons be held responsible for when one of their released prisoners becomes a recidivist, and that each prison be given a recidivism rate based on those recidivists. This would be a far better way to connect the inner workings of a prison with that prison's effectiveness, but unfortunately such data is not available. Another limitation is that it is somewhat unclear what exactly prison funding is used for. Why prisons must give their expenditures, they do not have to break down what each dollar goes to. This leaves some uncertainty to whether or not more “well funded” prisons are actually spending that money on programs.

The next piece of data is just to have more time. Unfortunately SB601 was only passed in the year 2015. The only public database that the bill requires from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations only stretches to the latter half of fiscal year 2020-2021. The quarterly system does make the data fairly robust for what it is, but if there was a ten year period to look at then it may be more possible to look into changes within prisons themselves. Although without a per prison recidivism rate, such changes would still be subject to speculation when it comes to evaluating efficiency.

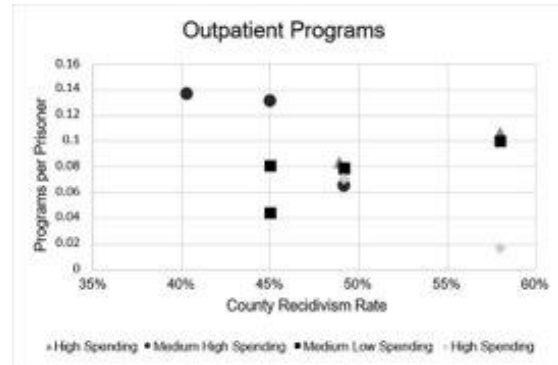
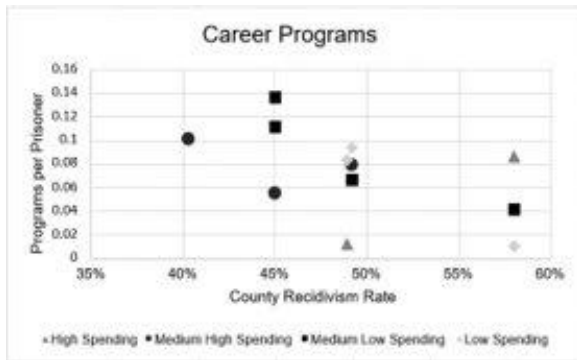
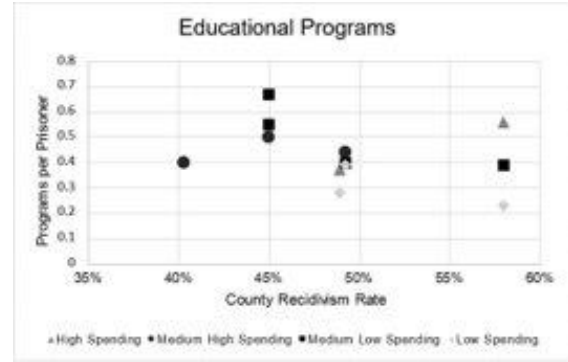
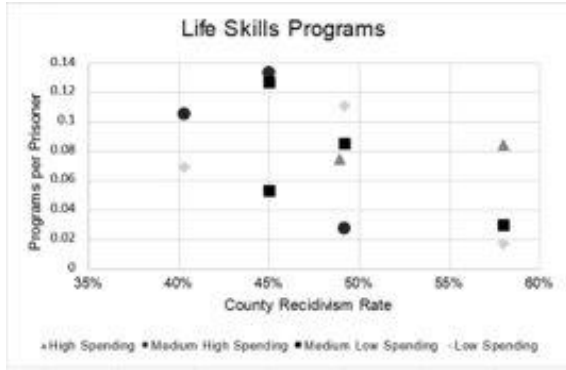
### **Design: Final Remarks on Data and Nature of Data.**

Unfortunately that nature of prison statistics means that trying to judge prison effectiveness off of county recidivism rate and programs is somewhat weak. That is not to say that either are meaningless factors when determining if prisons are effective, but the way the

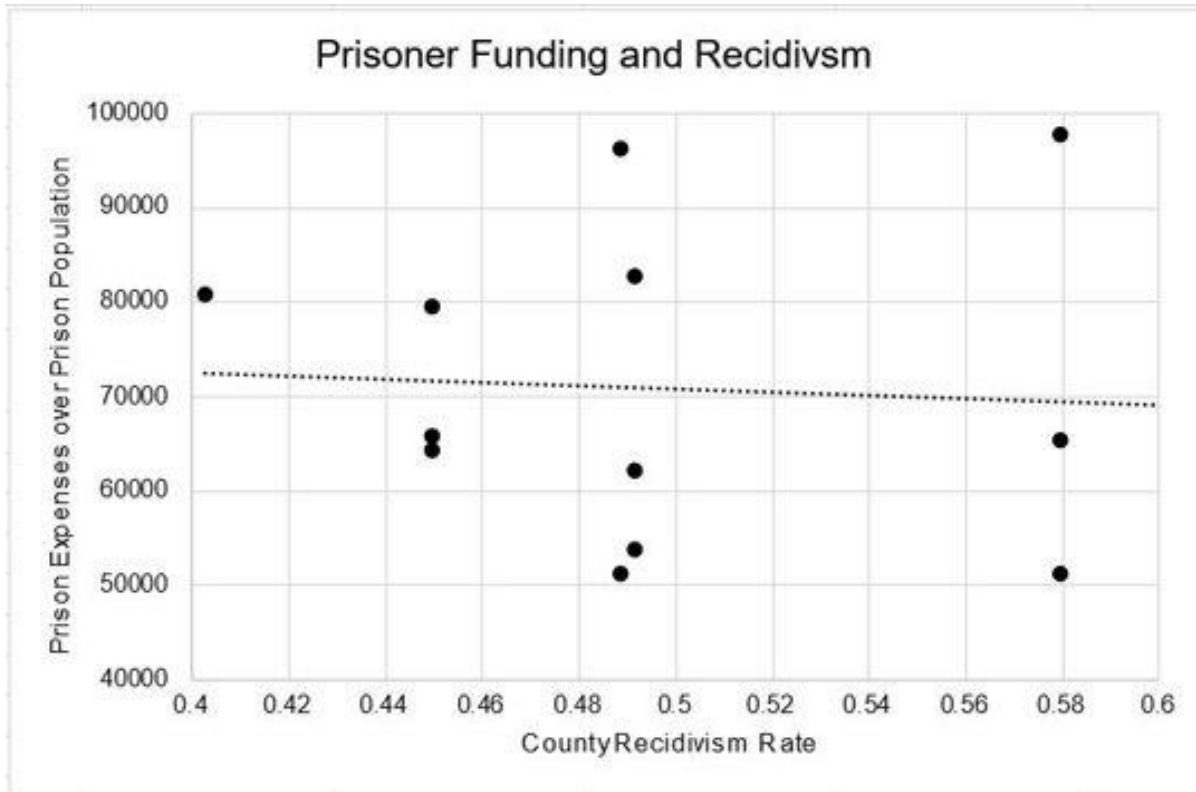
statistics are currently structured makes both less effective than originally hoped. I will say that there are certainly numerous strengths to using hard data such as program availability and recidivism rate. Mostly that it provides quantifiable data for which comparison is less up for interpretation than most qualitative forms of data collection. Moreover, a spread of data points and prison statistics are fairly consistent save for a change in the method of collection. It also allows for better measures of trends between years, and as this specific set of data is an average from a fiscal year, it is more resistant to individual oddities that may alter a dataset. There is also always the inherent risk of having people, or in this case an agency, give data about itself.

### **Findings: An Overview of Main Analysis Findings and Other Takeaways.**

The purpose of this analysis was to compare the effects of programs on recidivism rate. Funding was used as a way to try and determine how effective programs were, and to see what effect funding had on prisons more generally. The quick generalization of the findings are that, in regards to the current way statistics for prisons are presented, that funding and programs do not correlate with recidivism rate. Nor did it seem that funding had too large of an impact on the number of programs provided. However, there are still conclusions to be drawn from some of the other facets of the study that are not necessarily about the direct relationship of prison programs and county recidivism rate.



When it comes to programs specifically, the most interesting finding is what programs are provided, and what programs get filled. As previously mentioned, career programs are the most filled at prisons, which begs the question of why they are not also made available at a greater rate. When it comes to program specifics, it would also be interesting to look more into the case of life skills, as it easily had the strongest trend line between the number being offered and the recidivism rate. It, alongside life skills, are some of the newer programs that have been brought into California prisons. As such these programs are still very much in their developmental phases, and for that reason it would be interesting to see how much of an impact they would have in future years. Given the afformented growing mental health crisis within prisons, it could be that some of these “soft skill” programs could come to be very useful for the future.



As for the relationship between prison funded and these services, most connections are fairly nebulous. For a start there is no real correlation between funding per prisoner and recidivism rate. The trend line is very slightly negative, but other than that there does not seem to be significant correlation. There is some connection, however, between prison funding and programs offered. That said, the connection is not very strong. This comes as a consequence of not being able to see exactly what prison funding is being spent on. Even with this limitation, there does seem to be some relationship that keeps the more well funded prisons have more program availability on average.

**Conclusion: What Should California and the United States of America Do in Regards to Prisons and Prison Programs?**



Using the data available, in large part thanks to SB601, I was able to compare information about prisons within the State of California. This was in the hopes of finding a meaningful connection between prison recidivism rate and the programs offered at state prisons. Unfortunately, there was next to no connection, but that does not mean there is nothing of value to be taken away from the lack of connection. Now I will not be putting forth that the solution is to end these programs, because they appear to not do much according to the data. Rather I am more than certain that we need to change the way that prisons operate more generally, and specifically change the way that they provide their statistics. The largest problem is definitely that recidivism rate is calculated on a per county basis, rather than a per prison basis. This is a massive issue, because it allows prisons to obscure how well or poorly they are doing because they do not have to fully answer for their actions. Rather the county is the one that gets associated with the recidivism rate. If prisons were instead the ones that had the recidivism rate tied to them, then it would be so much simpler to see what prisons are being effective and what are not. This would be beneficial to more than just programs, as the whole way prisons are run could be changed if only there were better ways to see what methods are effective or not. Moreover, I expect that a change toward a more quantitative statistical method when it comes to prison effectiveness will expedite the rate of reform in both California, and the United States. If the failure of the many reform bills in the past is anything to go off of, then the lack of provable efficiency is one of the major roadblocks to moving prisons forward in any meaningful way. I also expect it would be a massive aid to some of the Norwegian Model pilot programs, to show if such a system even works in the United States.

However, given what is available now I believe that it is important to continue to try and obtain qualitative data from prisoners about what they believe helps them. As mentioned earlier,

qualitative data for prisons is hard to obtain and often flawed, but not so flawed as to be unusable. Furthermore, there is benefit in listening to prisoner concerns, especially as mental health starts to become a much more prevalent issue within prisons. Poor life in prison is a contributing factor to recidivism, and in many ways it is inhumane. For those reasons, it is important to make sure that the prison system becomes adaptable and transparent, as that is the only way that reform will be successful in the future.

## Works Cited

- Chabria, Antia “California to Transform Infamous San Quentin Prison with Scandinavian Ideas, Rehab Focus.” Los Angeles Times, 16 Mar. 2023,  
<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-03-16/newsom-wants-to-transform-san-quentin-using-a-scandinavian-model>.
- Martell, D A et al. “Base-rate estimates of criminal behavior by homeless mentally ill persons in New York City.” *Psychiatric services* (Washington, D.C.) vol. 46,6 (1995): 596-601.  
doi:10.1176/ps.46.6.596
- U.S. Department of Justice, “Prisoners in 2021 - Statistical Tables”. 2022.  
<https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/p21st.pdf>
- Tamborini, Christopher R., ChangHwan Kim, and Arthur Sakamoto. 2015. “Education and Lifetime Earnings in the United States.” *Demography* 52: 1383–1407.  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html>
- Commentary, Guest. “California Criminal Justice System Has a Long Way to Go If Newsom Wants to Model Norway.” *CalMatters*, 28 Apr. 2023. *calmatters.org*,  
<http://calmatters.org/commentary/2023/04/california-prison-system-norway-model/>.
- Initiative, Prison Policy, and Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner. *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023*. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2023.
- Baggio S, Peigné N, Heller P, Gétaz L, Liebrezn M, Wolff H. Do Overcrowding and Turnover Cause Violence in Prison? *Front Psychiatry*. 2020 Jan 24;10:1015. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2019.01015. PMID: 32038335; PMCID: PMC6992601.
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “Population Covid Tracking”. 2023.  
<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/population-status-tracking/>

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “Offender Recidivism”.

<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/offender-outcomes-characteristics/offender-recidivism/>

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “SB601 Dashboard”.

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/cdcr.or/viz/SB601/Statewide>

Zoukis, “Inmate Education Levels.” Law Offices of Grant Smaldone,

<https://federalcriminaldefenseattorney.com/inmate-education-levels/>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2023.

Senate Committee on Public Safety, “SB 601”. 2015.

[https://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/15-16/bill/sen/sb\\_0601-0650/sb\\_601\\_cfa\\_20150427\\_112844\\_sen\\_comm.html](https://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/15-16/bill/sen/sb_0601-0650/sb_601_cfa_20150427_112844_sen_comm.html)

California Health Policy Strategies, “The Prevalence of Mental Illness in California Jails is

Rising: An Analysis of Mental Health Cases & Psychotropic Medication Prescriptions, 2009-2019”. 2020.

[https://calhps.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Jail\\_MentalHealth\\_JPSReport\\_02-03-2020.pdf](https://calhps.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Jail_MentalHealth_JPSReport_02-03-2020.pdf)

World Prison Brief, <https://www.prisonstudies.org/>

Harris, Heather. “California’s Prison Population Drops Sharply, but Overcrowding Still Threatens Prisoner Health.” Public Policy Institute of California,

<https://www.ppic.org/blog/californias-prison-population-drops-sharply-but-overcrowding-still-threatens-prisoner-health/>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2023.