

## **CORRECTIONAL RECREATION AND THE SELF-ESTEEM OF PRISON INMATES**

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Institutions of incarceration have always had some type of recreational program but the outcomes of these types of programs have not been well documented. Historically, they have been time fillers to keep inmates busy, and have been used as an element of social control. In this study, we examined the outcomes of a correctional recreational program, especially its impact upon prisoners' ( $N = 177$ ) self-esteem. It was found that inmates use recreation as a coping mechanism for their incarceration because is the only time during the day in which they can freely express their personality and, thus, have some type of activity for positive development.

*Keywords:* prison inmates, correctional recreation, recreation activities, personality, incarceration, self-esteem.

The benefits of recreation in a correctional institution are numerous, but can be summarized as helping the prisoner become an individual who can function in society without breaking the law. Among prison inmates, 90% are released without new coping skills (Speckman, 1981) into the community, that is, into the same environment in which they had problems that contributed to their incarceration (Brayshaw, 1978; Cipriano, 1976).

A large portion of inmates' time is spent in leisure. Leisure education in correctional institutions might provide an inmate with the information needed to deal with the problem of how to use his/her leisure in a constructive way (Brayshaw, 1978). If criminal behavior is learned, reeducation is required to learn new behavior patterns (Corcoran, 1985). Recreation may be able to discourage deviant behavior by teaching

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The content and formatting of this article were edited and updated in 2016, with efforts made to preserve the original meaning.

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constructive and creative use of time (Kraus, 1978; Morris, 1974). If the inmate wants to change, recreation can act as a resocialization force, through which inmates can learn new social skills that will aid their integration into the community upon release (Decker, 1969; Flynn, 1974; Jarvis, 1978; Kraus, 1978; Nicolai, 1981; Speckman, 1981; Velde, 1974).

Inmates experience four types of losses during incarceration: freedom, a sense of reality, sensory experiences, and the reality of who they really are. Through recreation, inmates can experience situations in which they have some limited control over these four areas for a short time, which helps them to counterbalance the unrealistic situation that exists in correctional institutions. This also aids in the resocialization process.

Many inmates experience problems with authority, confusion about life goals, self-image, and heterosexual relationships (Decker, 1969; Kroll, Edgerton, Mack, & Flaherty, 1984). Recreation offers ways of dealing with these feelings (Flynn, 1974; Johnson, 1968; Kraus, 1978; Speckman, 1981; Velde, 1974) through learning new skills (Brayshaw, 1978; Carol, Poole, & Romero, 1985; Kraus, 1978; Krug, 1979), increasing morale (Brayshaw, 1978; Kraus, 1978), building positive values (Kraus, 1978), encouraging exercise (Brayshaw, 1978; Carlson, Maclean, & Deppe, 1979), and releasing urges that were previously fulfilled through violence or criminal behavior (Carlson et al., 1979). It also relieves the monotony and boredom of living the same existence day after day (Aguilar, 1986; Anderson, 1982; Chubb & Chubb, 1981; Crutchfield, Garrette, & Worrall, 1981; Speckman, 1981). Positive mental health can be a secondary benefit of correctional recreation (Aguilar, 1986; Arjo & Allen, 1981; Chubb & Chubb, 1981; Flynn, 1974; Muth, 1974; Palmer, 1981), by improving inmates' self-concept and allowing the goal of rehabilitation to be more easily met (Kraus, 1978). It also reduces resentment among inmates (Walker, 1974), helps with adjustment to prison life (Aguilar, 1986), and reduces the amount of violence (Brayshaw, 1978; Flynn, 1974) by providing inmates with a constructive outlet for their emotions.

During an inmate's waking hours, 44% of the time is spent on leisure activities (Stein & Sessoms, 1983). It is up to the recreation staff and, ultimately, the prison administrator, as to how that time is spent. Recreation, which is only one component of the lives of inmates (Flynn, 1974; Kraus, 1978; Park, 1974; Velde, 1974), has been shown to have benefits for nonincarcerated populations. Inmates need to be seen as a total person, and recreation is a part of this concept (Wollard, 1972).

One of the first concerns in assessing correctional recreation programs is determining if the programs exist. In a national survey of institutions that was conducted by the Creative Use of Leisure Under Restrictive Environments group (Crutchfield et al., 1981), only 63% returned the survey. Whether the other 37% of the institutions had a recreation program

is unknown. Of those that did return the survey, the type of recreation varied greatly between institutions. Just over 50% of those who responded had a written policy concerning recreation. Basketball, softball, volleyball, and weight lifting were available in at least 50% of the institutions, but these institutions were lacking in other areas (Crutchfield et al., 1981).

Jewell (1981) conducted a study of state maximum security prison administrators, collecting information on the existence of programs and administrators' opinions on these programs. All of the male and coed facilities surveyed had recreation programs, as did 13 of the 16 female facilities. Of the administrators, 94% thought that recreation was a part of rehabilitation. Corrections officials encouraged recreation participation in 73% of the facilities, because 78% of the administrators felt that this meant fewer security problems because inmates were kept busy and out of trouble. Further, 87% felt that recreation should be offered on a daily basis, 80% felt that there was a need for more facilities, and 75.5% reported there being a need for more recreational personnel.

Jewell (1980) looked at the staffing in maximum security prisons and reported a year later that administrators were saying that they needed more recreation personnel. All-male institutions had an average of 4.1 full-time and 0.4 part-time recreation staff members, for all-female institutions it was 1.3 full-time and 0.4 part-time recreation staff members, and for coed institutions it was 2.8 full-time and 0 part-time recreation staff members. This was further emphasized by the average ratio of recreation staff to inmates: male institutions had a ratio of 1:946.5, female institutions 1:180, and coed institutions 1:642.3 (Jewell, 1980).

Investigating the effects of recreation/sports on delinquency is another way of examining this relationship. Schafer (1969) did this by reviewing the high school records of 585 boys in the tenth grade, and juvenile court records. A negative association was found between athletic participation and delinquency, such that those with a high grade point average were more likely to be athletic and nondelinquent (Schafer, 1969). The same results were obtained in a similar study conducted over a longer period of time (1959–1972). Furthermore, those not involved in athletics or service activities had a higher level of delinquency than either had separately (Landers & Landers, 1978).

Prior researchers have focused on the recreational pursuits of inmates prior to incarceration, during incarceration, and postincarceration, possibly because most crimes are committed during the inmate's leisure/nonwork time. Panik and Mobley (1977) studied only males and found that their recreational activities prior to and postincarceration consisted of watching television, drinking, and spending time at taverns. These results were further substantiated by Orton (1977), who studied both male and female inmates at the Iowa State Men's Reformatory and the Rockwell City

Women's Reformatory. The men in his study also participated in weight lifting and baseball, whereas the women listened to the radio and stereo watched television, and read. The average inmate in his study had a low income and low educational level (Orton, 1977). The results from these studies suggest that people who are in correctional institutions lack variety in their recreational pursuits, and also lack the money to pursue some of the recreation activities that the middle and upper classes enjoy.

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Inmates in a correctional institution are a special population; however, within the institution they are not homogeneous. In the studies reviewed, self-esteem seemed to play a role in the criminal behavior of inmates. Although their self-esteem reached a low point in the middle of their institutionalization before returning to the level it had been prior to incarceration (Tittle, 1972), there was no way of knowing the short-term effects of low self-esteem.

Our study purposes were as follows: 1) to determine if there is a correlation between inmates' self-esteem and the types of recreation most frequently participated in, and 2) to examine the relationship between interest in those activities and self-esteem.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The study population comprised the 1,800 male inmates housed in the Lima Correctional Institution located in Lima, Ohio. We chose this institution because the recreation program offered included most of the areas listed in the Guide to Avocational Activities (Overs, 1972). Using a random number table, we chose 620 numbers: 600 for participants and 20 to replace inmates who were unavailable on the days the survey was being administered.

### Measures

A two-part interview schedule was used to collect the data. The first part was a checklist designed in conjunction with the institution's recreation director and deputy superintendent, and focused on interest and actual participation in different activities offered during incarceration. The checklist of specific activities was taken from the Guide to Avocational Activities (Overs, 1972) and adapted to include only those offered at Lima Correctional Institution. Questions asked were "Does this activity interest you?" and "How many hours a week do you spend on this activity?"

The second part was adapted from Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) by Bennett, Sorensen, and Forshay (1971). The scale was designed specifically to assess the self-esteem of inmates in correctional institutions, in terms of the dimensions of self-degradation,

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assertiveness, leadership, and family. Five indices were developed: one for self-esteem and one for each of the dimensions. When the adapted inventory was tested for reliability, all correlation coefficients were significant at  $p < .01$  (Bennett et al., 1971).

Among the 620 surveys distributed, only 247 inmates completed the form. Possible reasons for the low response rate include the voluntary nature of the survey, thus allowing the inmate a rare chance to say "no"; other activities conflicting with participation (job, school); inmates having been moved to other institutions; inmates not being in the general population (confined for protection or discipline); and distrust of an unknown researcher with a possible affiliation with the prison. No comparisons can be made between respondents and nonrespondents because no information was collected from nonrespondents.

After individuals completed the survey, we spent 2 days in the records office collecting the following demographic information directly from each inmate's file: age, race, reading level, offense, maximum sentence, date eligible for parole, and amount of sentence served. This procedure was used to collect the most accurate information.

In total, 223 surveys were usable after coding. To ensure that the sample was representative of the total prison population, we selected surveys at random. Comparisons were made between the population and the sample based on type of offense and age; thus, 177 representative surveys were used in the analyses.

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### **Data Analysis**

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine if relationships existed between time in prison and self-esteem, and between time spent on leisure and self-esteem. Type of offense (Felony 1: crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape, and burglary; Felony 2: crimes such as felonious assault, extortion, arson, and drug offenses; Felony 3: crimes such as vehicle theft, extortion, and receiving stolen property; and Felony 4: crimes such as vandalism, aggravated assault, and forgery) and self-esteem (total, self-degradation, assertiveness, leadership, and family) were the stratifications used for analyses. A stepwise regression was used on participation and self-esteem and on interest and self-esteem. Standardized beta coefficients were used to assess the relative importance of the variables. Significance was set at  $p < .10$  for all analyses.

## **Results**

### **Time: A Possible Controlling Factor**

Time was an important factor identified in literature that may have been a controlling variable. Tittle (1972) found that self-esteem was high at the

beginning of the prison sentence, low in the middle, and high at the end. In an effort to determine if this factor was a controlling element, we developed two ratios: one between maximum sentence and time served, and the other between time served and time until eligible for parole. A Pearson product-moment correlation was performed on each of the time indices and the self-esteem index. No significant relationships were identified, indicating that time was not a controlling variable.

**Recreation Involvement and Self-Esteem**

Once it had been established that the sample was representative of the population and that time was not a controlling factor, the next question was “Is there a relationship between time involved in leisure activities and the positive development of self-esteem?” An index of involvement in leisure was obtained by summing the hours of participation in all leisure activities. A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between leisure involvement and self-esteem, and the results showed this was nonsignificant. This suggests that for overall involvement in recreational activities, the basis of time did not relate to self.

**Participation in Specific Recreational Activities and Self-Esteem**

When a stepwise regression was performed on individuals with Felony 1 offenses, billiards, competitive weight lifting, horseshoes, basketball, religious services, and MABE were positively related, and card games were negatively related to self-esteem (Table 1). When Felony 2 offenses were analyzed, individual weight lifting, jogging, and softball were positively related, and elderly exercise group, arts and crafts, and television watching were negatively related to self-esteem (Table 2). None of the activities positively correlated with self-esteem in the analysis of Felony 3 offenses, but track and field and stress management were negatively related to self-esteem (Table 3). For Felony 4 offenders, there were no positive relationships identified, but beginners exercise group was negatively related with self-esteem (Table 4).

Table 1. *Stepwise Regression of Participation for Felony 1/Self-Esteem*

Activity	Standardized $\beta$
Card games	-3.54
Billiards	2.78
Competitive weight lifting	4.54
Horseshoes	2.62
Basketball	2.28
Religious services	3.11
MABE	3.31

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**Table 2. Stepwise Regression of Participation for Felony 2/Self Esteem**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Indoor weight lifting	4.05
Jogging	6.46
Softball	7.82
Elderly exercise group	-8.24
Arts and crafts	-4.34
Watching television	-5.39

**Table 3. Stepwise Regression of Participation for Felony 3/Self Esteem**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Track and field	-6.57
Stress management	-11.07

**Table 4. Stepwise Regression for Participation for Felony 4/Self-Esteem**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Beginner's exercise group	-4.81

Self-esteem and its component parts (that is, degradation, assertiveness, leadership, and family), activities, and interest were incorporated to examine how specific involvement and interest relate to self-esteem and its components. For self-esteem in relation to participation, billiards, religious services, competitive weight lifting, and MABE were positively related, and the general educational development test was negatively related to self-esteem (Table 5).

**Table 5. Stepwise Regression of Participation/Self-Esteem – Total**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Billiards	1.19
Competitive weight lifting	1.61
Religious services	1.25
General educational development (GED) test	-0.98
MABE	3.07

When interest was related to self-esteem, weight lifting, basketball, and reading and library use showed positive relationships, and painting, radio and music listening, and interface showed negative relationships with self-esteem (Table 6). When the relationship between self-degradation and participation was analyzed, chess, billiards, reading and library use, religious services, and interface were positively related, and television watching was negatively related to self-esteem (Table 7).

**Table 6. Stepwise Regression of Interest/Self-Esteem – Total**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Indoor weight lifting	0.97
Basketball	1.04
Painting	-1.17

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Table 6 continued

Listening to the radio and music	-1.60
Reading and using the library	1.52
Self-awareness	1.59
Interface	-1.03

Table 7. *Stepwise Regression of Participation/Self-Degradation*

Activity	Standardized $\beta$
Chess	0.42
Billiards	0.54
Watching television	-0.52
Reading and using the library	0.48
Religious services	0.32
Interface	0.50

Checkers, competitive weight lifting, volleyball, reading and library use, and vocational training were positively related to interest and self-degradation, whereas card games, softball, concerts, and ABE were negatively related (Table 8). For assertiveness in relation to participation, chess, checkers, individual weight lifting, concerts, reading and library use, and MAB were positively related, and card games and GED were negatively related (Table 9). Regarding interest and assertiveness, reading and library use and individual weight lifting were positively related and card games and interface were negatively related (Table 10).

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Table 8. *Stepwise Regression of Interest/Self-Degradation*

Activity	Standardized $\beta$
Card games	-0.34
Checkers	0.63
Competitive weight lifting	0.48
Softball	-0.44
Volleyball	0.89
Reading and library use	0.53
Concerts	-0.42
ABE	-0.65
Vocational training	-0.55

Table 9. *Stepwise Regression of Participation/Assertiveness*

Activity	Standardized $\beta$
Chess	0.27
Checkers	0.55
Card games	-0.47
Indoor weight lifting	0.31
Reading and library use	0.37
Concerts	0.51
MABE	0.92
GED	-0.43



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**Table 10. Stepwise Regression of Interest/Assertiveness**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Card games	-0.29
Indoor weight lifting	0.41
Reading and library use	0.47
Interface	-0.46

Bingo, basketball, elderly exercise group, and religious services were positively related to self-esteem and participation, and ping pong and beginners exercise group were negatively related (Table 11). Regarding the leadership–interest relationship, bingo, basketball, reading and library use, and self-awareness were positively related, and radio and music listening were negatively related (Table 12). For the relationship between self-esteem and participation, individual weight lifting and MABE were positively related, and radio and music listening and GED were negatively related (Table 13). Individual weight lifting, horseshoes, and football were positively related to self-esteem and interest, and drawing and radio and music listening were negatively related (Table 14).

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**Table 11. Stepwise Regression of Participation/Leadership**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Bingo	0.64
Ping pong	-0.59
Basketball	0.71
Elderly exercise group	-1.02
Beginners exercise group	0.71
Religious services	0.54

**Table 12. Stepwise Regression of Interest/Leadership**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Bingo	0.71
Basketball	0.37
Listening to the radio and music	-0.93
Reading and library use	0.47
Self-awareness	0.50

**Table 13. Stepwise Regression of Participation/Family**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Indoor weight lifting	0.48
Listening to the radio and music	-0.67
MABE	1.17
GED	-0.39

**Table 14. Stepwise Regression of Interest/Family**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Standardized <math>\beta</math></b>
Indoor weight lifting	0.44
Horseshoes	0.48
Football	0.39
Drawing	-0.69
Listening to the radio and music	-0.57

## Discussion

Activities can be used to characterize an individual and their coping style, and identify important personality and character traits, because individuals are free to express themselves through their leisure activities. However, certain variables were found in this study to be more important than others are because they were significant in more than one category of self-esteem (see Tables 5–11).

Specifically, individual and competitive weight lifting were significant in eight categories. Participants in these activities are very competitive, not only within this activity but also in the pecking order of the prison. These people tend to be leaders, and to be social and enjoy the social aspect of this activity. They survive in prison due to their large physical size.

Reading and library use were positively related to self-esteem in six categories, which may be significant for several reasons. Individuals involved in this activity may be escaping from the reality of their situation through the fantasy in books, or using the available literature to better themselves. Further, by involving themselves in a solitary activity, they may be refusing to take on the negative role that the system places on them by maintaining the belief that they are not like the other inmates.

Radio and music listening was inversely related to self-esteem in four categories. This is probably because individuals who participate in this activity do not use their time well, that is, they engage in activities that do not enhance the self-esteem. Alternatively, these people may seek to rebel against the system through lack of involvement, and listening to the radio and music is what they choose to do with their time to remain uninvolved.

Religious services were positively related to self-esteem in three categories. Some individuals who are involved in such services may see religion as a way to explain why they are there, that is, it happened for a reason decided by a higher power. The opposite may also be true: they may, through religion, see the problems in how they were previously living their lives, and also find answers that were not previously available.

Numerous individuals appeared to be interested and involved in a variety of activities, such as creative activities, individual competitive and noncompetitive activities, religious activities, and competitive team sports, some of which are positively related to self-esteem. Efforts should be made to reinforce those specific activities and to add a larger variety of activities, because diversity is also positively related to self-esteem.

We contend that correctional recreation—or, at least, certain aspects of it—are indeed related to the development of the self-esteem or prison inmates by offering a constructive outlet for self-esteem retention or development in an otherwise negative environment. Better use of leisure skills and retention of high self-esteem could help to reduce recidivism.

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More research is necessary to further explore the possible ramifications of correctional recreation and its possible use as a therapeutic tool within correctional institutions. We found that specific recreation activities within broader coping styles were directly related to self-esteem. Further, self-esteem had a strong effect on delinquency; thus, further research into the therapeutic value of recreation in regards to self-esteem is recommended. Finally, finding ways to help inmates achieve and maintain higher self-esteem could lead to a lower rate of recidivism.

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