

## **The Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Over Incarceration**

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## **The Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Over Incarceration Reform**

The ultimate goal of the criminal justice system has always and forever been to fluctuate between deterrence and rehabilitation as a representation of commonsense societal values and largely political orthodoxies. Traditionally, incarceration appeared as a humane alternative to the practice of corporal punishment; however, the contemporary penal system has been showing more and more limitations as a tool of crime prevention and social security. The modern polemic revolves around the question whether methods of reforming the offenders through treating their mental state, education, and the preparation of skills can provide better results than the simple punishment in the form of incarceration (Arbour et al., 2021). The world practices, the research on recidivism, and the psychological theory all start to prove that well-funded rehabilitation not only makes the ex-offender less likely to repeat the crime but also makes society safer and more economical than any locking mechanism ever could. This essay looks into the empirical, ethical, and practical aspects of the superiority of rehabilitation with consideration of the challenges to implementation and the possibilities of integrated models and systems of sustainability reform.

### **Theoretical Foundations and Historical Context**

The retributive model of justice focuses on the idea of punishment as a moral necessity since sentences are associated with the severity of offences, regardless of whether or not there are opportunities for change. Based on the idea of "just deserts" and social denunciation, this policy has been prevailing in the late 20th-century omnipresent policy and, most evident of all, the California law commonly referred to as the "Three Strikes rule" (1994) that required long prison sentences in cases of repeat offenders and led to the quintupled incarceration rate during the 1970s-2005 period<sup>2</sup>. In comparison, the type of paradigm known as the rehabilitative approach regards criminality as frequently being attributable to modifiable risk factors, such as

substance abuse, trauma, lack of education, and mental illness, and tries to manage these underlying factors.

Assembly Bill 109 (2011) decongested the prisons by sending home nonviolent crime convicts; Proposition 47 (2014) transferred the class of nonviolent convictions of crimes into misdemeanors resulting into 30% decline in incarceration; and finally, Proposition 57 (2016) doubled the parole eligibility and offered rehabilitation credits to those convicted (Cristobal & Raza, 2023). These steps are indicative of a gradual trend in agreement that punishment does not work to disrupt the motives of crime; rather, rehabilitation holds the possibility of life-changing value to the criminal and to the community.

### **Recidivism as the Primary Metric of Effectiveness**

The greatest empirical case to rehabilitate is that it is effective in reducing recidivism. International figures paint a deep picture of contrast between punitive and rehabilitation results: Conventional Types of Incarceration: The United States, which mainly adopted a punitive model, is achieving recidivism rates between 40-60 percent in three years after release, compared with Britain, which has a recidivism rate of around 45 percent, 310. These numbers reflect the overall breakdown in terms of how prisoners are prepared to be reintegrated.

Rehabilitative Interventions: California is an example of reform that is showing positive results, as highlighted by the results of the participants of the credit programs in Proposition 57, which had a 39.2 percent recidivism rate compared to 45.6 percent of those who did not take part in those programs. More ostentatiously, the LandWorks program in the UK, which offers vocational skills training, counseling, and transitional programs to help ex-prisoners get back into the workforce, boasted a 6 percent reoffending rate in its community-based program.

Meta-Analytical Evidence:

- A 2021 systematic review of 29 randomized controlled trials (9,443 people) indicated that the psychological interventions were associated with recidivism odds of 28% (OR 0.72). Importantly, therapeutic communities were highly effective (OR 0.64), but the effect was reduced when applied to large studies because of uncertainties in implementation.

### **California's Transformative Shifts**

The transformation of California to a non-punitive strategy is a strong policy model. The overpopulation crisis reached its climax in the year 2011 when the Supreme Court ordered the lowering of populations, which led to reforms, and subsequent savings of about 800 million dollars via Proposition 47- the money was aimed at mental health facilities, drugs, and school programs<sup>2</sup>. The conversion of San Quentin State Prison to a San Quentin Rehabilitation Center represents this drift as the death row has been turned into study centers. The recidivism in the state decreased, and it indicates that the reorganization of the criminal justice system would lead to increased criminalization more sustainably than an increase in incarceration.

### **The Holistic Approaches of the United Kingdom**

UK parliament discussions focus on trauma-informed rehabilitation, support of neurodiversity, and employment opportunities. As the rates of dyslexia among prisoners (50%) are five times as high as among the general population (10%), learning needs can now be addressed by the special officers as an important step since education is connected with distance. Jobs in prisons, such as the Pennine Healthcare program in Derby, combine prison industries with day release work, and there are also so-called departure lounges that assist the transition. Data presented by the UK drug rehabilitation indicates gradual improvement: between 22.4 percent (2016) and 37.9 percent (2024) of the prisoners involved in treatment were free of

dependency (Sarai, 2022). This demonstrates the need for continuity of care in rehabilitation outside the prison walls.

### **Psychological and Behavioral Interventions**

The treatment of mental health is one of the key components of effective rehabilitation, as almost one out of five prisoners has a serious mental illness, 15-20% which is 3 times more prevalent than in the general population. Prisons have been turned into quasi-mental health hospitals without the equipment to treat people. When applied adequately, the results of interventions are, however, of immense importance:

- Substance Abuse Programs: Integrated testing and treatment in the UK show a decrease in positive screening results of traditional substances (18.1 to 10.5 percent, 1999 to 2020) and new psychoactive substances (12.9 to 4.3 percent).
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), even though meta-analytic reviews doubt the effectiveness of CBT alone, risk-need-responsivity (RNR) interventions, i.e., the way interventions are adjusted to the personal risks, are promising. The review of 2021 observes that the programs that guarantee continuity in the community after release are superior to the programs that are prison-based.
- Therapeutic Communities (TCs): These highly-organized cultures, with their provisions on accountability and peer supervision, decrease recidivism by 36 percent when compared to regular incarceration (OR 0.64) because they meet the criminogenic needs holistically.

### **Implementation Challenges and Critiques**

Despite robust evidence, rehabilitation faces significant practical and ideological barriers:

- **Resource Limitations:** Overcrowding and underfunding undermine program delivery. Psychologists in punitive systems report "enormous caseloads" that prioritize crisis management over rehabilitation, with insufficient staff for meaningful therapy 510.
- **Political and Public Resistance:** Critics equate rehabilitation with leniency, arguing it undermines accountability. This reflects a retributive worldview asserting that punishment expresses societal condemnation—a function deemed essential regardless of rehabilitative potential. California's reforms faced opposition despite reducing crime, illustrating the ideological divide.
- **Methodological Gaps:** Smaller studies overestimate rehabilitation's effects due to publication bias; larger RCTs show minimal or nonsignificant benefits when interventions are poorly implemented or lack aftercare. The "nothing works" narrative, though overstated, highlights valid concerns about program fidelity.

### **Alternative Models: Restorative Justice and Community Integration**

Other than clinical interventions, models of restorative justice (RJ) have proven to be more effective in mending the harm and building accountability. Other initiatives, such as the Insight Prison Project, California, and the Accountability Letter Bank, enable victim-offender discussions wherein the perpetrator is provided the opportunity to face the consequences (Logan et al., 2025). These methods minimize recidivism since they focus on reconnection to society as opposed to isolation.

### **Summation**

One aspect that is provable and clear when it comes to rehabilitation being superior to incarceration is the fact that rehabilitation can change lives, minimise crime in the long term, and optimise the fiscal resources. Whereas punishment fulfills the retribution urge, it aggravates the

trend of criminality through the acceleration of trauma, loss of social connections, and the inability to control the root cause. Proper rehabilitation, in turn, is a better way to invest in the safety of the population, as seen in the reduction of recidivism in California, the 6 percent reoffending rate LandWorks has, and the success of drug treatment in the UK. To obtain this potential, policymakers should:

- Make Therapeutic Communities and Continuity of Care a Priority: Financially support RNR-adherent programs that have strong programs after release, because fragmented interventions prove to be less effective.
- Divert Not Criminals: Increase options to prison, including mental health courts, probation with treatment requirements, and community service, thus leaving prisons to be used only with violent people who need to be incapacitated.
- Alleviate Structural Inequities: Spend any cost savings due to decreased incarceration (e.g., California has the potential to save \$800 million) on education, medical, and employment programs in criminogenic settings.

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