Long Sentences, Better Outcomes: Opportunities to Improve Prison Programming

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Introduction

People serving long prison sentences—defined as sentences of 10 years or more—make up a large and growing share of the prison population in the United States. In 2005, roughly 411,000 people were serving long sentences, accounting for 46% of the state prison population. By 2019, the number had grown to 472,000 and the proportion to 56%.  

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have long been interested in prison-based programming that prepares people to engage productively in their communities post-release and reduces recidivism (i.e., re-arrest, reconviction, or reincarceration). Although a robust body of knowledge on the types of prison programs most strongly associated with reduced recidivism has been developed over the past 40 years, research on the effectiveness of these programs has not focused specifically on participants serving long sentences.

Fewer than 10 prison systems have implemented programs specifically for people serving long sentences in recent years; these programs are in their infancy and have not yet been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness. They focus on enhancing skills for adapting to prison life and/or mentoring younger incarcerated individuals serving shorter sentences—and are not designed to comprehensively meet the therapeutic, reentry, and other needs of people serving long sentences. As a result, relatively little is known about the development, implementation, and effectiveness of programming that targets the unique needs of those in prison for long periods of time.

This brief describes the specialized needs of individuals serving long sentences, explores how prison-based programming might address those needs, describes existing programs for people serving long sentences, examines common obstacles to program access and engagement for this population, and identifies opportunities to enhance positive outcomes, both during custody and after release.

Key Takeaways

+ People serving long sentences make up a large (57%) and growing share of the incarcerated population in the U.S., and most will eventually be released to the community.

+ Those serving long sentences have distinctive needs that can make prison life and successful reentry difficult. These include needs related to aging, lengthy separation from family and community, institutionalization, and loss of hope.
Despite the robust knowledge base on effective prison programs and the needs of people serving long sentences, few programs specifically target this population. Those that do have not been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness in promoting institutional safety or reducing recidivism.

People serving long sentences often face obstacles to accessing prison programming when it does exist; many such barriers stem from restrictive security and housing classifications.

Prisons may be able to expand available programs by integrating people serving long sentences as peer support specialists in those programs.

More research is needed to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs tailored to the needs of individuals serving long sentences. As effective programs are identified and scaled, barriers to program access should be removed and participation in programming should be incentivized in a manner consistent with institutional and public safety.

**GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

- **Age-crime curve**: The fact that as most people age, their likelihood of engaging in criminal offending decreases
- **Desistance**: The process of discontinuing criminal behavior
- **Long prison sentence**: The Task Force on Long Sentences defines long sentences as prison sentences of 10 years or more. Numerous state and federal statutes use 10 years as either the maximum or minimum allowable term of imprisonment.
- **Program**: A “program” is a planned, coordinated group of activities or services carried out according to guidelines to achieve a defined purpose; also referred to as programming
- **Reentry**: The process of leaving incarceration and reintegrating into the community
- **Rehabilitation**: The act of helping people desist from criminal behavior through therapeutic programs, activities, incentives, substance use treatment, and other services designed to change behavior
THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE SERVING LONG SENTENCES

Like many incarcerated people, those serving long sentences have elevated rates of mental health and substance use disorders and face a range of challenges that complicate their adjustment to prison life and create barriers to successful reentry. But individuals serving long sentences also typically have characteristics that distinguish them from other subsets of prison populations. These differences include needs related to aging during a long period of incarceration, the challenges of experiencing prolonged separation from family and community, institutionalization, and loss of hope.

Aging

The number of people age 55 or over in state and federal prison has spiked by 280% over the last two decades; only 3% of incarcerated people were over age 55 in 1999, while 11% were over age 55 in 2016. Between 2010 and 2015, the proportion of older adults in prison increased from 7% to 10% of the national prison population, with states reporting individual increases of 8% to 12%. During this same time frame, the number of incarcerated young adults increased only 3%.

Although prison admissions increased for people aged 55 or older for both short and long sentences between 1994 and 2006 (and have remained relatively stable since that time), the proportional increase in the number of older adults in prison is attributed to increases in time served - sometimes referred to as a “stacking” effect - and people serving long sentences growing old in prison. For example, while 10% of the total prisoner population in 2013 was aged 55 or older, more than 30% of those with the longest time served were at least 55 years old. The share of older adults serving long sentences has increased over time; in 2013, 40% of those age 55 or older in state prisons had been incarcerated for at least 10 years, compared to 9% in 1993.

Incarceration has been associated with disproportionate rates of chronic health issues and disability, and the prison environment itself is harder on older adults. Research also has demonstrated that incarcerated people age more rapidly than individuals in the community, although little of this work has focused specifically on those serving long sentences.

Prolonged separation from family and community

People serving long sentences experience greater levels of social disruption than those who spend less time in prison. Being in prison for decades means that some form of loss is inevitable. Social ties dissipate, marriages end, and family members and loved ones die, sometimes extinguishing incarcerated individuals’ connection to the outside world and hope for the future. When people serving long sentences are finally released from prison,
they often enter an environment that is unfamiliar and difficult to navigate. For many, the technological changes that occurred over long periods of incarceration are overwhelming, and engaging in routine activities such as finding work and establishing or reestablishing relationships with family members is challenging.\textsuperscript{15}

Additionally, long periods of confinement have been associated with the development of a range of mental health disorders, from anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress.\textsuperscript{16} For some individuals serving long sentences, these symptoms can be described as “post-incarceration syndrome,” which involves the intersection of the long-term effects of institutionalization with psychological distress and mental health disorders.\textsuperscript{17}

**Institutionalization effects**

Some individuals who serve long sentences may experience institutionalization or “become institutionalized.”\textsuperscript{18} The terms “institutionalization” or “prisonization” describe the process by which people are changed by spending long periods of time in correctional facilities.\textsuperscript{19} The institutional environment of prison has a rigid structure that demands compliance and restricts individual movement and choice. For some individuals serving long sentences, institutionalization may create an inability to make life choices or decisions about the future, both during custody and after release.\textsuperscript{20} Institutionalization has also been associated with the development of physical and mental health disorders.\textsuperscript{21}

**Loss of hope**

Confronting a long sentence can have a particularly damaging impact on a person’s optimism about their future or their potential for engaging in a desistance process. Nearly 40% of individuals serving long sentences were incarcerated before the age of 25; but many of those who possess the greatest capacity for change because of their youth instead lose hope and struggle to build a life during incarceration, an outcome that reduces the likelihood that they will engage in a desistance process.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, because many people serving long sentences do not have a specified release date, they may delay their engagement in a process of behavior change. Research on brain development indicates that people’s brains and capacity for self-regulation are not fully developed until at least age 25.\textsuperscript{23} Although nearly all people engaged in criminal behavior during their youth will eventually “age out” of committing crime,\textsuperscript{24} engaging those serving long sentences in the desistance process is critical, both to accelerate change and help individuals internalize a positive identity and assume personal agency during their term of incarceration and for the future.\textsuperscript{25}

For those serving long sentences, catalyzing the behavior change and desistance process may also exert a stabilizing influence in the prison environment and allow them to serve as peer support specialists; in that role, they can deliver programming content and serve as
mentors for others who are serving shorter sentences and at higher risk for recidivism.\textsuperscript{26} Research examining the effectiveness of mentoring and peer-support programs in prison has generally produced positive findings,\textsuperscript{27} but few evaluations have focused on programs that use people serving long sentences as mentors or peer support specialists in prison settings. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of these programs and identify the conditions that facilitate positive outcomes.

**BENEFITS OF PRISON-BASED PROGRAMS**

Research over the past 40 years has identified an array of correctional programs that are effective at reducing recidivism and facilitating desistance from crime.\textsuperscript{28} Many of these programs promote safety within prisons for correctional officers, prison staff, and volunteers, as well as the incarcerated population.\textsuperscript{29} The vast majority of studies evaluating such programs have focused on people serving shorter sentences, as these individuals are released more often and therefore are able to experience post-release outcomes, including recidivism.

Broadly speaking, prison-based programs have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting hope and redemption for individuals in prison.\textsuperscript{30} This finding has particular relevance to people serving long sentences, as programming supports their interaction with clinicians, staff, and volunteers, all of whom can play a crucial role in keeping hope alive and facilitating behavior change and desistance.

Research on prison-based programs has also identified key principles for effective correctional interventions; these principles include matching program content, intensity, and delivery to the intended participants’ risk and need and being responsive to their learning style, motivation, abilities, and other salient characteristics.\textsuperscript{31} Programs that adhere to these principles consistently produce positive outcomes, with evidence indicating that positive effects are stable regardless of participants’ crime type and sentence length.\textsuperscript{32} These principles support targeting higher-risk individuals—including many people serving long sentences—for intensive programs and services, rather than excluding them from participation, which often occurs, because higher-risk individuals are unlikely to desist from criminal behavior on their own.\textsuperscript{33}

The principles of risk, need, and responsivity are important on their own, but the largest recidivism reduction effects occur when they are implemented together.\textsuperscript{34} For programs delivered in custodial settings, Bonta and Andrews (2007)\textsuperscript{35} found that the average recidivism reduction effects increased from 5\% to 17\% as the number of principles incorporated increased from one to three. Programs that focused on non-criminogenic needs, by contrast, were associated with an increase in recidivism of about 1\%.\textsuperscript{36} Research also demonstrates the value of having incarcerated individuals participate in multiple evidence-driven programs during custody. For example, Duwe and Clark (2017)\textsuperscript{37} found
that completing one recidivism-reduction program during incarceration lowered the odds of recidivism by 12%; completing two such programs lowered the odds by 26%.

LACK OF PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE SERVING LONG SENTENCES

Despite evidence indicating that the most effective programs are those that match content to the specific needs of participants, relatively few targeted programs focusing on people serving long sentences have been developed and evaluated. Although 14 state prison systems appear to offer some type of programming targeting those serving long sentences, program components vary widely, and range from programs to clubs, social groups, or geriatric release. Nine states offer some variation of a “Long-Term Offender Program” to people serving a long sentence, although even these programs were not designed to comprehensively meet the therapeutic, reentry, and other needs of this population.38

Many existing programs for people serving long sentences focus on developing or enhancing the skills needed to adapt to prison life and/or serve as a mentor to younger incarcerated individuals serving shorter sentences.39 Some programs designed for those serving long sentences train participants to function as peer support specialists, delivering prison-based programs to other incarcerated people.40 These programs are in their infancy and are generally limited in number and capacity, meaning that relatively few people are able to participate. Additionally, little is known about whether existing programs are effective at meeting their intended goals.41

Programs that help people serving long sentences adjust to life in prison or learn to serve as peer support specialists may promote institutional safety and increase participants’ hope for the future. But they were not designed to provide a comprehensive array of services to catalyze desistance and support an individual’s eventual return to the community.42 In pursuit of those goals, research supports tailoring mental health and substance use disorder programs, desistance and recidivism-reduction programs, and skill-development programs (e.g., educational and vocational programs) to the needs of people serving long sentences.43

Additionally, little research has been conducted to examine whether existing programs are effective for participants serving long sentences.44 As detailed in the next section, numerous obstacles prevent many individuals with long sentences from accessing prison-based programs at all.
PROGRAM AVAILABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

OBSTACLES

People serving long sentences can face a variety of obstacles as they seek to access prison programs. Prison sentences of 10 years or more are typically associated with convictions for serious and violent crime, or with more extensive criminal histories. Either way, in many states such backgrounds can disqualify people serving long sentences from accessing programs because of eligibility restrictions. Additionally, people serving long sentences are typically housed in the most secure prison settings, where resident movement is tightly controlled and restricted; providing programs in such settings is far more difficult than it is in lower-security settings. When programs are implemented in high-security facilities, individuals serving long sentences are often ineligible to receive incentives commonly offered for program completion because of the seriousness of their conviction offense or the security level of the facility in which they are housed. These include increased privileges or “earned time” credits that shorten one’s sentence.

Finally, most prisons typically prioritize those closest to release for program enrollment. While those serving long sentences constitute more than half (57%) of all incarcerated people, they account for a small share of overall prison releases (3.3%). While focusing scarce resources on people closer to their release date may be logical, these dynamics hamper program availability, access, and engagement for those serving long sentences, the vast majority of whom also will return home.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

One way prison administrators and staff can reduce barriers to programming for those serving long terms is to reduce constraints associated with work assignments and the movement of people throughout the facility. Periodically reassessing the housing and security classifications for people serving long sentences, for example, can ensure that they are not held in high-security settings based solely on their classification at admission. While reclassifying individuals throughout their incarceration has long been suggested as a best practice, it is unclear whether all systems or all facilities regularly engage in this process. Security and housing classification policies should account for rehabilitation, and the assigned risk levels and needs of people serving long sentences should be routinely assessed so that growth and personal development can be reflected in case management plans. Such efforts can enable the productive use of the years spent in prison and encourage people to engage in the desistance process.

Beyond removing obstacles to program participation, states and the federal government should develop, implement, and evaluate more programs tailored to the unique needs of people serving long sentences. Sufficient funding and training should be made available to
ensure that effective programming is widely available and implemented with fidelity. Expanding the number and types of programs available would ideally eliminate the need to restrict limited resources to people preparing for release and create more opportunities for those serving long sentences to participate. Finally, individuals with long sentences should be included in program development and program delivery. Research indicates that knowledge shared by peers engaged in program delivery is often the strongest foundation to support the change process and catalyze desistance for incarcerated individuals.\textsuperscript{52}

**CONCLUSION**

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of prison-based programming for promoting safety, both inside correctional institutions and in communities. Despite some indications that prison-based programs might be particularly important for people serving long sentences,\textsuperscript{53} multiple obstacles prevent such individuals from participating, and relatively few interventions have been tailored to the unique needs of this population. As individuals serving long sentences comprise a growing share of state prison populations, now nearly 60\%, their lack of access to programs and incentives to participate in them represents an ever-larger missed opportunity to improve both prison conditions and community safety.

As tailored programs are developed and implemented, research should explore how they affect quality-of-life and post-release outcomes for those serving long sentences and how they impact correctional staff. Studies also should examine the return on investment of such programs, as well as additional methods of enhancing access for those serving long prison terms.
Endnotes


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.


22 Urban Institute, 2017: supra note 11.


39 See, for example: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d; Georgia Department of Corrections, n.d., Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, n.d.; Restoring Promise, n.d.: *supra* note 3.

40 See, for example: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, n.d: *supra* note 3. The Offender Mentor Certification Program is a voluntary program for long-term and life-term incarcerated individuals that provides them with the training and education needed to become Alcohol and Other Drug.
Counselors. Upon graduation, mentors are assigned and paid as co-facilitators in Cognitive Behavioral Interventions programs throughout all adult institutions in the state.

41 Kazemian & Travis, 2015: supra note 5.

42 The Harvard University Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group, 2019: supra note 15; Legal Action Center, 2016: supra note 4; Marlowe, 2018: supra note 33.

43 Kazemian & Travis, 2015: supra note 5; Marlowe, 2018: supra note 33.

44 Kazemian & Travis, 2015: supra note 5.

45 Byrne & Taxman, 2004: supra note 4; The Harvard University Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group, 2019: supra note 15.


48 Boston Consulting Group, 2016; Bronner Group, 2016: supra note 47.


52 Barrenger et al, 2019; Barrenger et al., 2018: supra note 26; Cook et al., 2008: supra note 3; Johnson & Dobrzanska, 2005: supra note 26; McNeill et al., 2012: supra note 25.

53 Marlowe, 2018: supra note 33.