

**Research to Practice Paper**

**Reintegrating Prisoners into Society through  
Sports-Based Programs and Policies**

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INTD 497

Lessons of Community and Compassion: Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social  
Connectedness Through Policy and Program Development

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## Introduction

In 2013, the United States had among the highest rates of incarceration and recidivism in the world.<sup>1</sup> The latter refers to a person's relapse into criminal behavior after having undergone sanctions for a previous crime. Thus, high rates of recidivism are a clear indicator that a country's criminal justice system is flawed; this is especially true of the American system. High reoffending rates are often due to the disproportionate focus of criminal justice systems on 'punishing' offenders instead of helping them rehabilitate with an eye towards reintegrating effectively into society after they have served their time. While most prisons include rehabilitative programs, be they creative or academic, sport has yet to be seriously recognized as a powerful tool of self-transformation. In fact, the idea of prisons — whose primary purpose is to restrict human movement — implementing sports programs is an inconceivable idea for many who claim that prisons are not synonymous with holiday camps.<sup>2</sup> That being said, inmates are entitled to fundamental rights that should, in no circumstances, be violated. Physical activity, with its strong links to physical and mental health, is but one of them.

This essay will discuss why and how sport policies and programs should be implemented in prisons. First, we will examine sport as a means of individual empowerment, which itself is a precursor to reintegration and reconnection within society. Likewise, we will analyze how sports can bring about social cohesion on a societal level. We will then conclude by proposing policies that encourage long-term rehabilitation and foster connectedness.

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Deady, *Incarceration and Recidivism: Lessons from Abroad* (Newport: Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Norman, "Sports Behind Bars: Social Control, Resistance and the Physical Culture of Prisons," *The Society Pages*, July 5, 2017. <https://thesocietypages.org/engagingsports/2017/07/05/sport-behind-bars-social-control-resistance-and-the-physical-culture-of-prisons/>

## **Sport as Empowerment for Individuals**

Sports can lead to a number of positive outcomes for individuals, and if practiced on a regular basis, they can make the life of inmates that much more bearable. Sports relieve tension and stress and can provide a means of escaping the otherwise oppressive environment of prison. In that respect, participation in sport can be a rather enjoyable thing to think about and look forward to. But for inmates to truly reap the benefits of physical activity, sports facilities and programs need to be easily accessible.

Sport also resists the formation of ‘criminal identities’ among offenders.<sup>3</sup> Such identities are often created in prison and tend to replace pre-incarceration self-concepts linked, for example, to previous occupation or relationship status. Sport, and the symbolic capital that comes with it, can fuel a healthier alternative identity and avoid the potential internalization of the traditional ‘monstrous’ image of the prisoner.<sup>4</sup> This is important to consider as it can predict behavior upon release and can, in that sense, be related to recidivism.

Similarly, sport teaches us many valuable and practical lessons. Handling winning and losing, respecting opponents, and resolving conflict are just some examples of qualities that are of great relevance in the family, workplace, and educational environment.<sup>5</sup> They serve as a backbone for further development of a coherent sense of self, of citizenship, and of pro-social behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Thus, sports can help prepare inmates to face challenges they may experience upon release and potentially discourage them from going back to a life of crime. Essentially, when people are empowered to realize their full potential, they feel less disconnected and isolated from the mainstream system.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosie Meek, *Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings*. (Abingdon: Routledge Publishing, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> SAD Public, “Sport – a tool for the reintegration of prisoners?”, *Sportanddev*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/sport-tool-reintegration-prisoners>

<sup>6</sup> Rosie Meek, *Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings*.

## Furthering Social Cohesion at the Societal Level

In addition to encouraging individual ‘reconstruction’, sports programs can also create social cohesion and connectedness by combatting stigma and discrimination. This is where team sports come into play. For example, due to its popularity, football is a ‘neutral item of cultural common property’<sup>7</sup>, unspoiled by prejudice; thus, it can be a great tool to prevent the alienation of inmates on the basis of race, age, or class. Indeed, perceptions of an unworthy ‘other’ will likely change when the ‘other’ is your teammate and wants to win as much as you do. If one wants to succeed in team sports, it is in their best interest to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust within the team in order for cooperation to be optimal. Further, through team sports, relational skills can be improved, even for the most aggressive and unresponsive individuals.

Stigma in correctional systems can be fought in other ways as well. A notable example involves the support group, Addicts II Athletes, which has cooperated with the Utah Department of Corrections to include its programming in the local prison system as an innovative way to combat addiction and the image associated with it.<sup>8</sup> Through the act of running, ‘addicts’ are encouraged to reach sobriety and improve themselves physically and mentally. Participants set goals and train for races within the prison fences, the ultimate goal being to run a half-marathon.<sup>9</sup> By keeping inmates busy, giving them a sense of purpose, and increasing their self-efficacy, they are equipped with efficient tools for traversing the difficult road to recovery. While in its early days, the program has proven to be quite successful and has empowered a number of ex-addicts. Stigma, discrimination, and prejudice are prevalent both within and outside the prison, so tackling them, even at the micro level, paves the way for a more socially connected community.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Richards, *The Emotions at War: A Musicological Approach to Understanding Atrocity in Sierra Leone*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> “Addict II Athlete Helps Prisoners Battle Addiction,” *The Right Step*, Accessed November 7, 2014, <https://www.rightstep.com/addiction-recovery/addict-ii-athlete-helps-prisoners-battle-addiction/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The example of Addicts II Athletes highlights the importance of collaborations between prisons and external organizations. Notably, community organizations working in housing and financial services have successfully supported prisoners in the past.<sup>10</sup> This can be explained in part by the diversity of their provisions as well as their independence from the criminal justice system itself, enabling them to act as a bridge between prison and society.<sup>11</sup> These characteristics also apply to organizations offering sports programming, proving once more the great potential they have in bringing about positive change. For effective partnerships to be put into place, commitment from both parties (the sport organizations and the criminal justice system) is crucial. Likewise, these relationships need to be carefully managed, as it can be intimidating and difficult for external organizations to shape an impactful intervention and program if they lack the time and resources to do so.<sup>12</sup>

While initiatives like Addicts II Athletes have been received positively, that is unfortunately not the case for all programs. In “The Attitudes of Minority Inmates Towards Recreation Programs as a Rehabilitative Tool” (1986), Matthew McIntosh notes the most common criticisms from inmates, including that programs were poorly administered, devoid of any specific goals, and lacked sufficient supervision. Thus, if policies are to be implemented, investment in proper facilities and relevant resources should follow.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, if we want to make an impactful change, a holistic approach is absolutely crucial to break the cycle of recidivism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> EPAS Secretariat, *Pan-European Conference on “Sports and Prison”*, August 7, 2014, 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Matthew McIntosh, “The Attitudes of Minority Inmates Towards Recreation Programs as a Rehabilitative Tool,” *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services & Rehabilitation*, (New York City: Summer Publishing, 1986), 79-85

<sup>14</sup> Joe Jervis, “How Social Enterprise Can Help Reduce Re-Offending,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2013

## **Towards Long-Term Rehabilitation and Connectedness**

The Pan-European Conference on Sports and Prison, which took place in France in 2014, was undeniably a step in the right direction. In its quest to seek different ways to make sport a durable tool for rehabilitation, the Conference highlighted three key needs.

First, to maximize the impact of sports-based initiatives in prison, we must become more attentive to feedback and pursue prisoner consultations to better design and implement initiatives and programs. This would enable the identification of target groups and enable managers to establish appropriate activities that would best promote participation.<sup>15</sup> We must also recognize that inmates do not constitute a homogeneous group and will therefore not be affected equally by the same policies. In the framing of such sports program policies, the following guiding question must be considered: “Are barriers to sport-based activities replicated, heightened or minimized in the prison setting?”<sup>16</sup> For instance, we must encourage the participation and inclusion of women in sports programs, notably because of their great therapeutic potential in countering depressive and suicidal thoughts (women are disproportionately affected by depression).<sup>17</sup> Lower rates of female participation, even in non-mixed prisons, can be explained by a lack of interest, considering sport as a punishment, and negative attitudes toward the available options.<sup>18</sup> A similar case can be made about older or non-athletic inmates. As effective policies are inherently inclusive, it’s important to provide the choice between team and individual sports (jogging versus playing basketball, for instance) and to identify each inmate’s needs. Consultations are thus of primary importance inasmuch as they nurture trust and respect, ensure resources are effectively allocated, and identify the obstacles to the positive experience of sports in prison.<sup>19</sup> After all, forcing

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<sup>15</sup> EPAS Secretariat, *Pan-European Conference on “Sports and Prison”*, August 7, 2014, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Rosie Meek, *Sport in Prison: Exploring the Role of Physical Activity in Correctional Settings*.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, *Handbook for Prison Managers and Policymakers on Women and Imprisonment*, (Vienna: United Nations Publications, 2008)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> EPAS Secretariat, *Pan-European Conference on “Sports and Prison”*, August 7, 2014, 7.

inmates to participate in physical activities against their will would defeat the purpose of these programs; whereas asking for feedback and providing some choice would increase their perception of agency, which is of crucial importance in a context where it is already so limited.

In addition, partnerships at different levels are more likely to bring about social cohesion. In the case of France, public and private structures are subject to the same laws when it comes to sports (the Sports Code).<sup>20</sup> These laws have been implemented within the general strategy to promote the development of sport for all, even for those ‘in the hands of justice’.<sup>21</sup> Cooperation between the state and sports movements are necessary but incomplete without the intervention of other decentralized services that act more at the regional or local level.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, there is a general need to consider more creative ways to implement sport and physical activity within rehabilitative programs. While prisons are not known for their innovative spirit — after all, making a mistake in a prison context can be especially significant — they should be supported through national and perhaps even international networks of sport regulation and promotion. Such networks would provide central funding, create a space for ideas to be exchanged, and ensure monitoring of the different activities taking place across the criminal justice system.<sup>23</sup> Further, expecting prison-based policies to be truly effective without any kind of follow-up is unrealistic. Indeed, if inmates maintain their participation in recreation and physical activity post-prison, a healthier and busier lifestyle is almost assured.<sup>24</sup> With that also comes an enhanced sense of self-esteem, less idle

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>24</sup> Caplan, Arnie, “The Role of Recreational Sports in the Federal Prison System”, (PhD diss., Acadia University, 1996), 136.

time, and potentially reduced criminal activity.<sup>25</sup> Yet, for many, getting out of prison comes with a lot of uncertainty and fear about the future. Those feelings are exacerbated when they are met with very few available financial and social resources.<sup>26</sup> As such, sports facilities should become more accessible to members of society in general, regardless of economic status, ethnicity, or gender. Partnerships between prisons and sports federation could also prove to be beneficial in the identification of talent for potential future employment opportunities. However, it remains difficult to evaluate policies that affect ex-inmates simply because the latter have a right to anonymity after completion of their sentence.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, many individuals are adversely affected by the shortcomings of criminal justice systems. That is not to say that justice should not be served, as most inmates are evidently incarcerated for very valid reasons. Nonetheless, a restructuring is urgently needed for the overall wellbeing of society. Recidivism rates are a clear indicator that it is counterproductive to further marginalize, isolate, and ‘other’ ex-inmates once they have served their time — especially if structural and pervasive isolation is a partial explanation of their illegal behavior in the first place. Sport, however, is a universal language, a component of health, and a platform devoid of any symbolic connotation. Thus, its potential as a tool for rehabilitation and reintegration after prison should be harnessed by policy makers, practitioners, and academics. While productive sport policies and facilities have been implemented in a number of prisons across the world, more must be done if we want to create a lasting, positive impact. There is a pressing need for collaboration with external organizations and partnerships happening at different levels of society (regional, national, and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>27</sup> SAD Public, “Sport – a tool for the reintegration of prisoners?”, *Sportanddev*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/sport-tool-reintegration-prisoners>

even international). Likewise, we must ensure that programs are inclusive, and to the extent possible, individualized. As such, the outcomes of these programs will not be hindered by a high-rate of non-participation. Another element to consider is innovation, which is absolutely crucial if we are to have a long-term perspective. Innovative ideas should be accompanied by state funding, though stakeholders can also include sports federations, movements, and organizations that showcase sports in a developmental light. Innovation is also key for the development of ‘post-prison policies’. Finally, all programs should be properly resourced (funding, staff, even facilities) and regularly evaluated according to agreed-upon criteria.

While the examples in this essay focus specifically on Western countries, it is important to keep in mind that both the views of inmates and sporting institutions vary based on cultural views and norms. Nonetheless, belonging to, and being valued and empowered by, society is a universal value that transcends cultural boundaries, whether one is incarcerated or not.

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