

New tricks? Understanding the role of education, incarceration, and reentry on the older correctional population

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Abstract: *Education in prison provides an opportunity for personal growth and increased professional opportunities upon release. As older people leave prison and return to communities, the need for education serves multiple functions including successful reentry and healthy aging. The aim of this research was to explore the current literature relevant to older people during incarceration and upon release. The authors conducted a systematic literature review on 15 years of research between 2008- 2023 to understand how education in prison impacts older people while incarcerated and upon release. Articles published prior to 2008 were excluded from this study. Twenty-seven articles were included in the study. The study included articles both in the United States and internationally. Findings indicate that older people in prison already have a greater level of education upon incarceration and they are often excluded from opportunities like Federal Pell Grants, which are prioritized for younger learners. This limits their opportunities for further education during incarceration. However, education provides positive benefits for older learners including improved cognitive ability, increased social capital, and longevity. These benefits are pivotal to older people leaving prison who have limited opportunities for prosocial connections. Correctional and reentry efforts should emphasize learning for older adults to improve cognitive and social skills, reentry outcomes, and successful aging. Policy and research implications are discussed.*

Keywords: *Education, Rehabilitation, Prisoners, Older Inmates, Reentry*

Introduction

Prisons have increasingly grayed due to mass incarceration, lengthy sentences, the elimination of parole and legislative carve outs for serious offenses (Bertram, 2023; Petersilia, 2003; Silletti Murolo, 2020). However, upwards of 95% of those in prison will be returning home to their communities, including those of advanced age (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Carson & Sabol, 2016; Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Empirical literature underscores the exacerbated challenges that the elderly population (50+ years old) face post-release, including deteriorating health, lack of social support, homelessness, and limited employment opportunities (Murolo, 2022; Williams et al., 2012). While older adults often face employment discrimination, older people with a criminal history experience compounded disadvantages in the labor market (Grosholz et al., 2024). Older adults are working later into life due to increased age requirements for social security benefits (67), making education and training for older incarcerated adults more important than ever to overcome these barriers (SSA, 2023).



Prisons often provide vocational training programs and educational programs as part of their rehabilitative strategy (Couloute, 2018). However, many people who enter prison have already suffered from disparate educational outcomes (Harlow, 2003). Reentry support specialists report that older people leave prison without a basic education, making job placement difficult, assuming they can work at all (Campagna et al., 2024). As the prison population continues to gray, understanding the needs of this population are warranted. While the existing research highlights these aforementioned challenges, the role of education for older adults in the criminal justice system remains underexplored. Due to the advancing age of people in prison and the increased focus on education more generally, this systematic literature review addresses the scope of education and correctional supervision, and its impact on older adults.

Background Information

Historically, education has been the basis of rehabilitation in carceral settings. Education in prison has been perceived as a pathway to a better, and more economically sustainable life post-release (Ubah, 2004). Early prison education programs focused on literacy through reading the bible, seeking forgiveness for their transgressions; in other words, education was seen as a rehabilitative tool (Gehring, 1995; Messemer, 2011). During the 1800s, prison curriculum focused on reading, writing and math, and in 1847 New York State codified that formal education be made available in all correctional institutions (Gehring, 1995; Messemer, 2011; Wolford, 1989). During the Industrial Revolution, vocational programs expanded in prisons to meet the demands of the labor market upon release from prison (Eggleston & Gehring, 1986). By the 1960s, rehabilitation through education was recognized as an important component of desistance and the 1970s saw an expansion of government-based financial support for prison educational and vocational programs (Ryan, 1995). With the introduction of Pell Grants under the Johnson Administration, there became a major pool of funding for incarcerated individuals looking to pursue higher education (Ubah, 2004). Federal Pell Grants were administered with the intention of subsidizing the costs of higher education for low income students (Ubah, 2004). These grants were the underbelly of correctional education as much of the incarcerated population come from low income households (Ubah, 2004). However, the sentiment toward providing support for prison educational programs during the 1970s into the 1980s took a different turn. Specifically, Martinson's "nothing works" moment led to a reduction in financial and political support for prison-based educational programming (Martinson, 1974; Ryan, 1995).

The "tough on crime" phenomena of the 1990s further eroded support for educational programs. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 eliminated access to Federal Pell Grants for students in prison leaving little to no opportunities for secondary education in prison (Gehring, 1997; Messemer, 2011; Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994). However, many states still offered prison-based college programs at this time and continue to do so (Messemer, 2011). More recently, Federal Pell Grants were reinstated for students in prison on July 1, 2023, opening the door to the expansion of secondary education in prison once again (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2023).

Demographic/Educational Characteristics of Incarcerated Individuals

Prevalence and Incidence- High School Diploma, GED, and Vocational Programs

There is substantial evidence that incarcerated people are less educated than the general public (Couloute, 2018; Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011; Harlow, 2003). See Table 1. Data compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that in 1997, 41.3% of all incarcerated people did not have a high school diploma or GED (Harlow, 2003). Local jail inmates (46.5%) and state prisoners (39.7%) were the least likely to have achieved this status (Harlow, 2003). Later, data from the National Former Prisoner Survey (2008) indicated that more than half of formerly incarcerated people held a high school diploma or GED (Couloute, 2018). cause significant reductions in recidivism rate. Therefore, the results on the perspectives of correctional education programmes are inconclusive and require further research.

Table 1: Levels of Educational Attainment for Justice-Impacted People and the General Population Over Time

Level of Education	State Prisons				Federal Prisons				Jails			General Population		
	2016	2004	1997	1991	2021	2016	1997	1991	1996	1989	2021	2008	1997	1997
Some High school	62.3*0%	66.5*0%	25.5%	26.9%	28.5*0%	56.7*0%	14.5%	12.3%	33.4%	38.2%	8.9*0%	13%	11.2%	
GED	---	---	28.5%	24.6%	---	---	22.7%	22.6%	14.1%	9.2%	---	3%	---	
High school diploma	22.8%	21.7%	20.5%	21.8%	42.3%	21.7%	27.0%	25.9%	25.9%	24.0%	27.9%	28%	33.2%	
Postsecondary/some college	11.3%	8.8%	9.0%	10.1%	22.8%	13.9%	15.8%	18.8%	10.3%	10.3%	14.9%	26%	26.4%	
College graduate or more	3.6%	3.1%	2.4%	2.3%	4.2%	7.6%	8.1%	9.3%	3.2%	2.8%	34.0%	29%	22.0%	

Sources: Beatty & Snell, 2021; Couloute, 2018; Wolf Harlow, 2003; United States Sentencing Commission 2023; US Census, 2022

*Defined as less than high school diploma, United States Sentencing Commission, Bureau of Justice Statistics

While the percentage of people having at least a high school diploma or GED has increased over time, disparities in education among incarcerated individuals persist (Couloute, 2018; Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011; Harlow, 2003). Data from the 2009 American Community Survey indicated that younger incarcerated people were less likely to be enrolled in educational programs than people similarly aged in the general public (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011). See Table 2. Despite these challenges, older incarcerated people were more likely to be enrolled in educational programs than people in their age cohort in the general public (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011). Ewert & Wildhagen (2011) found that 32% of incarcerated people participated in vocational programs in prison; however, entry into such programs is prioritized based on need, which typically does not include older people in prison (Murolo, 2022). Both Black and White males in prisons have lower levels of educational attainment compared to those in the non-incarcerated population and especially among those who are economically disadvantaged (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011).

Table 2

Percent of Men Enrolled in Education Programs Status, Age, Race and Ethnicity, 2009

	Household Population	Prison Population
All men	9.3%	7.9%
Age		
18-24	44.8%	13.1%
25-44	7.7%	7.5%
45+ years old	1.4%	4.8%

Universe: All men age 18+ in 2009 ACS

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

Prevalence and Incidence- Secondary Education

There is a well-established relationship between prison post-secondary education and reduced levels of recidivism. Surprisingly, few college level programs exist, which makes achieving a secondary education in prison difficult if not untenable (Batiuk et al., 2005; Flynn & Higdon, 2022; Harlow, 2003; Karpowitz & Kerner, n.d.; Vacca, 2004). The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act prohibited people in prison from accessing Federal Pell Grants, which required educational institutions to fund college programs in prison independently (Henry, 2011). Unsurprisingly, this led to a drastic reduction in prison-based college programs “from 350 programs in 1994 to 12 programs in 2011” (Couloute, 2018; Henry, 2011 as cited in Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Several colleges and universities created prison-based degree-based programs and courses, however access to such programs was limited, even in individual states during this time (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017).

The reduction in prison-based programs during this era impacted the prevalence of people receiving prison-based college degrees. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 12.7% of the total incarcerated population had participated in post-secondary educational classes (Sokoloff & Schneck-Fontaine, 2017). Federal inmates (24%) had the greatest percentage of college or postsecondary participation, followed by 24% of probationers, 14% of people in jail, and 11% of state prisoners compared to 48% in the general population (Harlow, 2003). This data, which was collected in the 1990s, is reflective of the reduction in prison-based college programs (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Later data compiled by the 2009 American Community Survey found that 23% of people in prison participate in post-secondary education in prison. California was able to provide access to post-secondary education despite the elimination of Federal Pell Grants at the time (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011; Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). The Second Chance Act allowed for educational pilot programs in 2016; 67 colleges provided educational services to 12,000 people in prison in 100 prisons across the United States (Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). Nonetheless, formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to complete a college degree compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts, or stated differently, just 4% of the incarcerated population had completed a degree according to the National Former Prisoner Survey of 2008 (Couloute, 2018).

Experiences of Elderly Incarcerated Individuals

While historically there have been educational programs in place for people in correctional facilities, there have not been explicit considerations for older people in prison, particularly given that the graying experience comes with its own unique challenges and vulnerabilities compared to their younger incarcerated counterparts. It is well known that prison is a stressful environment; however, for the 50+ population these stressors are especially acute (Merkt et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). In the carceral setting, the categorization of older or elderly is much earlier than that of the general population with a benchmark beginning at 50 years old (Merkt et al., 2020). This population often faces declining mental and physical health problems along with cognitive decline (Williams et al., 2012; Williams & Abraldes, 2007). Given that most correctional facilities are not equipped to handle the complex medical needs of elderly inmates, many are faced with inadequate care (Smoyer et al., 2019). Correctional facilities often face limited resources when it comes to staffing and resources to serve a population with such challenges (Stojkovic, 2007). Elderly incarcerated individuals are at an elevated risk of being victimized in carceral settings for multiple reasons (Arias et al., 2023). Elderly individuals in prison can be at greater risk for retaliation in reporting any abuse or mistreatment due to their high level of reliance on the correctional facility for basic needs (Arias et al., 2023). In addition, this population is more likely to suffer from heightened social isolation, a lack of social support, and family estrangement due to lengthy sentences (Smoyer et al., 2019).

Reentry and the Role of Education

As previously mentioned, education can play a significant role in one's desistance from crime; however, the positive role of education extends well into the reentry process (Evans et al., 2018; Runell, 2017). Moreover, research has shown that not only can education play a powerful role in desisting from crime, but also can help combat the stigma of being a formerly incarcerated individual and instill a positive sense of self as one reenters society (Evans et al., 2018). Research by Runell (2017) supports the argument that education plays a key role in motivating law abiding behavior well into the reentry process by affording individuals a sense of personal autonomy and offsetting the stigma of a criminal conviction.

While the aforementioned existing literature addresses the scope of educational attainment under correctional supervision, it is critical to understand how educational programming impacts one of our fastest growing populations in prison: our elderly population. The literature review at hand addresses what is known about educational attainment and the elderly incarcerated population both during incarceration and post-release.

Method and Eligibility Criteria

To conduct this literature review, we followed the standards of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analysis (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021). Our initial review identified articles that were retrieved using the search terms described. Articles were excluded if they did not address education and incarceration, education and reentry or older adults. Articles that did not address the United States criminal legal system were excluded, unless there was explicit reference to the focus of this research which is older people, education and correctional supervision. Articles were then reviewed in greater detail to determine whether: 1) they were peer reviewed, and 2) they addressed how older people were impacted by the included studies. At this level of review, we included evaluation reports and gray literature. During the review process, three researchers screened article titles and abstracts separately to ascertain whether articles met the inclusion criteria. If there were disagreements, full articles were read and discussed with all of the researchers until consensus was met.

Databases and Search Terms

To locate articles for this study, the researchers and the research assistant used four search platforms during the Spring 2023 (January- May 2023) academic semester including Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier, Gale Academic OneFile, and Criminal Justice Abstracts. Search terms for this study included "adult education and prison," OR "education prison," OR "older adults and education," OR "prison education and older adults," OR "reentry and education." Search terms were selected based on the target area of study,

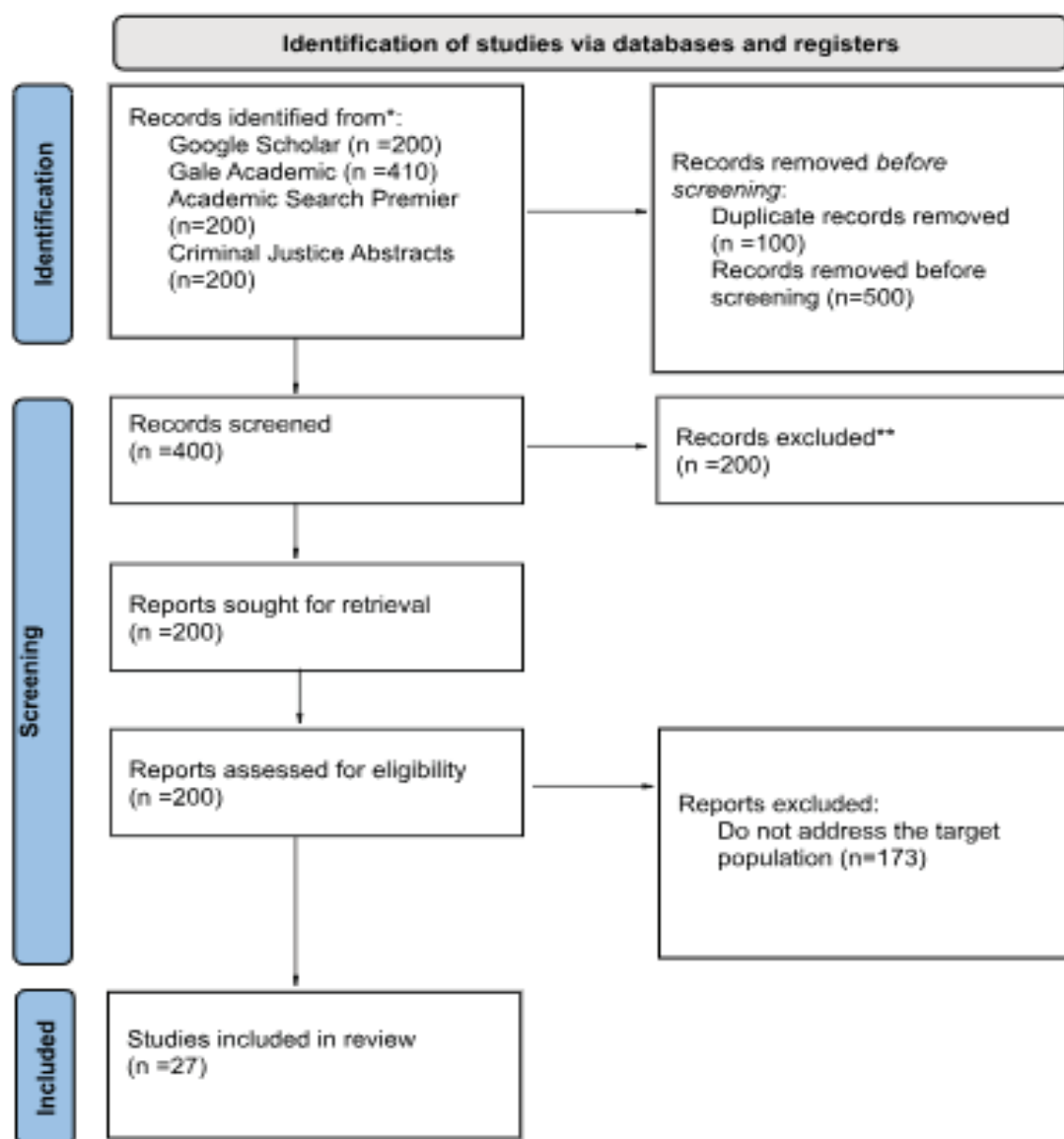
which was older adults and education both in prison and during reentry. Peer reviewed journal articles and government reports that were available in PDF format were used for analysis; articles that were not available in this format were excluded from this study. The study was limited to articles in the English language. Articles published between 2008, and May 2023 were included in this study. Articles that addressed “education,” “correctional supervision” and “older adults” were included in this analysis.

Results

Our initial search produced 1,400 articles. From these articles, 100 duplicates were removed. The remaining 1,300 article titles were screened for relevance to the search terms and target demographic and 500 articles were removed at this time. Of the 400 article abstracts screened at the second level, 200 were excluded from further analysis. Two hundred articles were retrieved and reviewed for eligibility; 173 articles were discarded at this time leaving 27 articles for review in this study. See figure 1 for selection details shown in the PRISMA diagram and table 3 for a summary of studies and databases used to extract the articles utilized for this study.

Figure 1

PRISMA Analysis



*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Table 3: Articles included in analysis

Author(s)	Year	Search Terms	Search Platform(s)
Bavishi et al.	2016	older adults, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Brazzell et al.	2009	reentry, education	GS
Chen et al.	2008	older adults, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Conway	2022a	adult education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Conway	2022b	prisons, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Combalbert et al.	2019	age, prison	Criminal Justice Abstracts, GS
Davis et al.	2015	adult education, prison	GS
Duwe & Clark	2014	prison, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Esperian	2010	adult education, prison	Criminal Justice Abstracts, Gale Academic One File, GS
Ewert & Wildhagen	2011	prison education, older adults	GS
Flynn & Higdon	2022	prison, education	Academic Search Premier, Criminal Justice Abstracts, GS
Formosa	2012	older adults, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Galloway	2021	adult education, prison	Academic Search Premier, GS
Hall	2015	prison, education	Criminal Justice Abstracts, Gale Academic One File, GS
Halkovic et al.	2013	prisons, education	GS
James	2014	reentry, education	GS
Jhi & Joo	2009	older adults, education	GS
Kallman	2012	adult education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Ketelle	2019	adult education, prison	Academic Search Premier, GS
McAleese & Kitty	2020	prison, education	GS
Pelletier & Evans	2019	adult education, prison	Gale Academic One File, GS
Pompoco et al.	2017	prison, education	Criminal Justice Abstracts, GS
Rakes et al.	2018	prison education, older adults	Criminal Justice Abstracts, GS
Scott	2016	prison, education	Academic Search Premier, GS
Taliaferro & Pham	2017	prison, education	GS
Taliaferro & Pham	2018	prison, education	GS
White et al.	2015	older adults, education	Gale Academic One File, GS

*GS (Google Scholar)

Findings

The Role of Education in Restoring Humanity in the Carceral Setting

It is no secret that humanity is undermined, if not void in carceral settings. Context is at the heart of the discussion on classrooms, education, and carceral settings. These physical differences and their impact on the delivery of education cannot be ignored when talking about the role of education and incarcerated students. Students are learning in a place where social control is at its height, and they are under constant surveillance. Extant literature demonstrates the power of education and elements of a classroom space to restore a sense of humanity (Conway, 2022a; Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Many qualitative studies have highlighted education and learning as a rehabilitative practice and in the context of equality (Galloway, 2021). Education within the carceral setting can also be a way for incarcerated students to create a sense of camaraderie and most importantly, a space to build social capital (Galloway, 2021). This is especially true when students share experiences with their classmates and forge connections that otherwise might not happen (Galloway, 2021).

The Classroom as a Transformative Space

Identity formation is also a part of restoring humanity. The classroom can be envisioned as a space to understand more about oneself and challenge existing power structures (Galloway, 2021). While the prison space has often been envisioned as a space that constricts learning, recent literature has pointed to the unique advantages that the prison context can serve in terms of learning (Kallman, 2020). Kallman's study (2020), found that education in prison can serve as rebirth to individual learning, particularly for students who have had negative educational experiences in K-12 education. College in prison can give students a sense of autonomy in this way. Qualitative research on education in prison shows that the learning of "something new" or knowledge can make incarcerated students feel alive and empowered (Kallman, 2020). This sense of being alive is important to understanding the role education can play in restoring humanity, especially behind bars. It can also be a space where students are able to demonstrate some sense of autonomy in a space that is highly regimented (Conway, 2022a; Kallman, 2020). Students are able to have a sense of control through knowledge acquired and being responsible for their own classwork (Kallman, 2020). Another characteristic of education in prison is the communal aspect of learning that education in prison brings where classmates can bond over coursework and learn something new about each other (Kallman, 2020). These interactions can shed positivity outside the classroom setting as these incarcerated individuals now have a better understanding of each other and have a bond through learning.

The prison classroom provides a place to ameliorate the negative effects of incarceration. The carceral setting creates damaging and stigmatizing effects on students in prison and their ability to create prosocial identities (McAleese & Kilty, 2020; Wright, 2014). As total institutions, prisons reject "being" or personhood and offer few opportunities to engage in multiple identities that people frequently perform in the non-incarcerated community (e.g., parent, student, friend) (Wright, 2014). However, the prison classroom provides an opportunity to exchange the master status from "prisoner" to "student" (Hughes, 1958; Liska & Messner, 1999; McAleese & Kilty, 2020). This is possible through dialoguing and creating a space for constructive participation, cooperation, and transformation and simply to "live" (McAleese & Kilty, 2020; Wright, 2014). Developing such skills are necessary to recreate their lives, build social capital, and prosocial identities (Flynn & Higdon, 2022; McAleese & Kilty, 2020; Wright, 2014).

Educators have a unique role in reducing the "pains of imprisonment" and facilitating prosocial identities by providing comparable experiences outside of prison (Wright, 2014). Because prisons strip people of their self-agency and identity, educators can elicit multiple identities or provide students the opportunity to consider others' positions outside of prison (Wright, 2014). For example, Ketelle (2019) uses fiction and storytelling techniques to expand identities, increase empathy, emotional literacy, and wellbeing (also see Oatley, 2011). Emotional literacy refers to understanding thoughts, feelings, and emotions both in oneself and others (Ketelle, 2019). Ketelle (2019) further posits that learning fiction also reduces racial bias and produces a sharper mind, which is especially relevant as one ages (Bavishi et al., 2016).

Health, Desistance, and Reentry

Education and Health

Among older adults, one's level of education and health are intrinsically linked (Adams, 2002; vanHooren et al., 2007; White et al., 2015). While most of the literature focusing on the relationship between education, age, and health are earlier than the parameters of this study, prior and current research indicates that education has a positive effect on cognitive functioning, healthy aging, perceived health, and general health among older adults (Adams, 2002; vanHooren et al., 2007; White et al., 2015). There is a paucity of literature on prisoner levels of education and its impact on health outcomes. However, emerging research examines perceptions of health and its relation to education among older people in prison. Iversen et al. (2014) investigated factors that impact perceived health among 144 incarcerated people in Norwegian prisons. Results indicated the odds of perceived good health increased with higher levels of education (Iversen et al., 2014). While this study does consider age as a variable, the researchers do not look at the intersection of advanced age, education, and perceived health (Iversen et al., 2014). While this study was conducted outside of the United States, it is within the scope of relevance in this study. However, Combalbert et al. (2019) interviewed 133 men over 50 to understand perceptions of health and quality of life and its relationship to education levels. Results indicated a negative relationship between education and depression or psychological distress (Combalbert et al., 2019). Stated differently, those with higher levels of education experienced lower levels of emotional issues compared to those with lower levels of education. While both studies begin to investigate the relationship between age, education, and perceived health, further research with larger sample sizes is needed to generalize findings.

Education and Reentry

The role of education in the reentry process is evident throughout existing literature. Educational programs have been shown to increase social bonds within the community upon return and open up prosocial doors, one being increased employment opportunities (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Moreover, current literature points to educational programs instilling an increased sense of confidence upon release back into the community and a desire to make the most of their lives post-incarceration (Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Scott, 2016). Educational programs also have shown psychological benefits in the reentry process for individuals returning to the community (Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Scott, 2016). Educational programs during incarceration can open up employment opportunities for individuals returning to communities making them less likely to reoffend or at the very least, participate in a criminal lifestyle (Esperian, 2010; Hall, 2015; Wilson et al., 2000). Research continues to show that educational skills obtained during incarceration have resulted in reduced recidivism, despite whether the education was vocational, higher education, or basic educational programs (Esperian, 2010; Hall, 2015; Scott, 2016). Many prison education programs offer formerly incarcerated individuals the opportunity to build skills that can be utilized upon release. Thus, individuals will not have to resort to crime limited employment opportunities (Esperian, 2010; Hall, 2015; Scott, 2016). In addition to acquiring academic skills in the classroom, it has also been posited that social skills learned by simply being in a physical classroom setting are also a benefit of prison education (Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Scott, 2016).

Halkovic et al. (2013) utilized participatory action research methods to understand the experiences of returning to college after incarceration. Research indicated various structural barriers to a college education including discrimination in the admissions process, resistance by parole officers, the inability to socialize with other formerly incarcerated students, and the stigma of a criminal conviction (Halkovic et al., 2013). Halkovic et al. (2013) also reported that the support that was available in this research for these particular students was because of location and a school that welcomes the formerly incarcerated, whereas other students outside of this area (New York City) may not be as welcoming. Students in this research also reported positive experiences with the faculty, classmates, and classes as well as wanting to give back to their communities, a willingness to learn, and a commitment to changing their lives for the better (Halkovic et al., 2013). This research is consistent with the experiences of older people in prison; both older males and females were more likely to be enrolled in educational programs or have a willingness to learn compared to their younger counterparts (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011).

Education and Desistance

There is extensive research addressing the relationship between prison educational programs and recidivism. Prison based education programs have been shown to reduce reoffending and increase employment opportunities post-incarceration (Brazzell, 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Esperian, 2010; Pompoco et al., 2017; Taliaferro & Pham, 2018). In Ohio, research on the impact of educational programs on prison misconduct and recidivism was conducted examining data on 92,000 men admitted to Ohio prisons between the years of 2008-2012 (Taliaferro & Pham, 2018). Educational programs included vocational training, apprenticeship programs, GED, and post-secondary educational programs (Taliaferro & Pham, 2018). Results indicated that completing programs during incarceration correlated with lower rates of recidivism within three years of release (Taliaferro & Pham, p. 5). Furthermore, those who completed vocational training, college courses and GEDs reoffended 4.2%, 5.6%, and 6.1% less, respectively within three years of release (Taliaferro & Pham, 2018; Pompoco et al., 2017). However, Pompoco et al. (2017) did not consider the effects of age on education and recidivism and studies on the effectiveness of GED education and its impact on recidivism are inconsistent (Batiuk et al., 2005; Duwe & Clark, 2014; James, 2014).

Early research highlights the relationship between education and increased employment opportunities, thereby reducing recidivism and improved chances for success upon release (Esperian, 2010; Harer, 1994; Pompoco et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 1997; Uggen, 2000). More recent research highlights the differences between secondary and post-secondary education and recidivism. Duwe and Clark (2014) investigated the impact of secondary and post-secondary education in prison and its effects on employment, wages, hours worked, and recidivism using survival analysis models. Results indicated that a secondary degree increased the odds of obtaining employment, but did not have a significant effect on recidivism, hourly wages, hours worked, or wages earned (Duwe & Clark, 2014). Additionally, hazard ratios for recidivism were greater for younger people, but they failed to operationalize “younger,” so the scope of the measure is not clear (Duwe & Clarke, 2014). Results for those obtaining a post-secondary degree while incarcerated indicated a decreased risk of reoffending (Duwe & Clarke, 2014). The odds of finding employment within two years of release increased for younger people, but again, there is no explanation for how the authors differentiate “younger” and “older” people. Reductions in offending are also based on the improvement of social skills, prosocial values, and cognitive functioning (Brazzell, 2009). Earlier research on educational outcomes and incarceration also found improvements in developing a prosocial identity and building self-esteem and self-efficacy (Batiuk et al., 1997; Fine et al., 2001; Harer, 1995). These prosocial benefits of educational programming during incarceration are particularly true among younger incarcerated people.

There are few studies that investigate the relationship between age, education and recidivism or desistance from criminal activity, however those that do find no relationship between such variables. Jhi and Joo (2009) investigated the relationship between age and parole outcomes of 12,894 adults on parole in Texas to understand the predictors of recidivism. While education in prison was a significant predictor of parole failure for adults aged 18-24 years old it was not for those aged 45 and older (Jhi & Joo, 2009). Stated simply, educational programs in prison were more useful for younger adults compared to their older counterparts (Jhi & Joo, 2009). Later research by Rakes et al. (2018) investigated the odds of recidivism among discrete older age groups of people over the age of 45 released from prison in North Carolina from 2004-2005. Bivariate statistical results indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between return to incarceration and education (Rakes et al., 2018). Results indicated that criminal offending declined with age, however education was not a statistically significant predictor of recidivism (Rakes et al., 2018). While both studies do not support education having an impact on recidivism among the older incarcerated population, further research is needed to support these findings. Nonetheless, education does have other positive impacts on older adults including healthy aging (White et al., 2015).

The Adult Learner/Adult Education in Non-Incarcerated Communities

Universities of the Third Age (UTA) or what are known as “lifelong learning institutes” have a long history in the non-incarcerated community. Such institutes provide the opportunity for older people to learn and grow well into their senior years and develop social support systems or social capital through friendships (Formosa, 2012). UTAs aim to increase social integration, visibility, quality of life, and successful aging for seniors (Formosa, 2012). UTAs are often housed in colleges and universities, typically where gerontology programs

exist. Many people who participate in older adult educational programs are already highly educated (Formosa, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews conducted by Formosa (2012) on students' reasons for participation in such programs include making up for lost (educational) opportunities and to socially connect with like-minded people. However, both Formosa (2012) and Chen et al. (2008) point out that older adult learners are not a homogeneous population. In Chen et al.'s (2008) review of the literature on older adult learners they found that prior research did not operationalize "age" or "older." This is consistent with the previously outlined research in this study. Additionally, research rarely considered cognitive based changes to learning, gender, physical ability, or mobility in educators' approaches to learning (Chen et al., 2008). While both Chen et al. (2008) and Formosa (2012) found that adult learners are highly motivated to learn, they also found that UTAs attract people who have the time, money, and therefore privilege to learn about subjects that are interesting to them. This class distinction may deter or exclude people who are of a lower educational or socioeconomic status from participating in such programs (Formosa, 2012). This may be particularly true of older people leaving prison, although older incarcerated adults are motivated to learn (Ewert & Wildhagen, 2011). In a survey of community-based organizations' willingness to support older people leaving prison, educational institutions accept older people with criminal records in both traditional and adult educational programs on campus, but they do not actively recruit them (Campagna et al., 2024). This is supported by earlier research that found that UTAs or lifelong learning institutes fail to reach isolated men and other hard to reach senior populations (Williamson, 2000 as cited by Formosa, 2012).

Discussion

Results have shown that education has numerous benefits for both young and old, however they may serve older and younger people differently. Both older and younger people benefit from building social skills and social capital as well as expanding their identities and emotional capabilities. While younger people may receive greater benefits in terms of decreased risk of reoffense, older people who are educated enjoy better health and longevity. This is incredibly important as one advances in age and creates an opportunity to offer greater educational options for older people in prison and upon return to their respective communities. Whereas the aims of prison education have evolved over time, they must continue to evolve to address the needs of older adults. While the focus of reentry often revolves around desistance from crime, reentry must move beyond its focus on recidivism and focus on well-being and life satisfaction, especially as people age (Murolo, 2022; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022).

The fact that so few articles focus on educational attainment and aging is troubling considering the increasing proportion of older incarcerated people, and by extension, older people leaving prison. Research has indicated that people in prison age at an accelerated rate and this would likely include the likelihood of dementia and cognitive decline. Therefore, one would think that offering educational classes focusing on the older incarcerated population would have mental and psychological benefits. Investing in such programs would save prisons money by delaying the care that is needed for people suffering from these conditions.

Providing greater opportunities for learning can improve health outcomes, stall cognitive decline, improve communication skills and connections to their fellow community members. However, there is a lack of research on older incarcerated people and education or reentry. Given the expectation of a growing "gray" population, there should be greater efforts by the correctional system to focus on vocational, reading and general education programs to prepare older people for release from prison. Recent research by Campagna, Murolo, and Delgado (2024) focuses on community organizations' interest in supporting returning older seniors who can aid in such efforts. Given older incarcerated adults' willingness to enroll in educational programs, opportunities for further education should be emphasized in reentry programs. It is well known that education can play a pivotal role in desistance from crime and in a more successful reentry (Evans et al., 2018; Runell, 2017). Providing educational opportunities both in prison and upon release from prison can stop the revolving door from community to prison and back again.

Moving forward, there simply must be an increased effort to research matters related to older justice-impacted people. This literature review aids in providing a window into understanding the needs of older incarcerated people as well as their reentry needs, however there is scant research beyond literature reviews and qualitative studies. Data on education levels and jail populations are dated and, therefore, limited. A more

rigorous research agenda focusing on older people is needed to ensure both successful reentry experiences and the possibility of successful aging.

Limitations

Although this study provided a comprehensive overview of education and older adults over the course of incarceration and their return to non-incarcerated communities, there are limitations that should be addressed. First, while there are extensive studies on education and incarceration, most pre-date the parameters of this study. Publicly available data on prison educational programs and their demographic variables are within the parameters of this study but are dated. More current data is needed to get an accurate depiction of who is participating in such programs. Second, there are few studies that focus on education after incarceration in the context of reentry programs. Third, there is a paucity of rigorous studies on this topic; many are descriptive in nature, based on personal accounts, have small sample sizes, or are literature reviews. Fourth, research that does investigate age as a variable on educational outcomes does not operationalize “older” and “younger,” making their findings vague and difficult to triangulate. Fifth, this research focused on justice impacted men; women’s experiences differ from men and were not accounted for in this study. Finally, much of the available research assumes the inmate population is homogeneous, therefore availability of information on the older learner is limited. Further research is needed to understand this population.

Conclusion

A greater proportion of incarcerated people are of advanced age and 95% of them will return to non-incarcerated communities (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Carson & Sabol, 2016; Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Older adults are working later in life and having an appropriate education is more necessary than ever to secure decent wages thus increasing the chances of successful healthy aging. With the resumption of Federal Pell Grant access to people in prison, prisons should make learning a priority. While the media often focus on the economic or crime reduction benefits that educating people in prison provide (Conway, 2022b), the social and health benefits should be the focus for older people coming home.

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