Current Issues in the Rehabilitation of Convicted Felons in Florida

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Incarceration is a primary form of punishment for felony offenses in the state of Florida (Ward & Brown, 2004). According to the Justice Department of Florida, incarceration is defined as punishment, crime prevention and rehabilitation (Manza, 2003). Issues regarding rehabilitation of convicted felons in the state of Florida once the felon has been released is impacted by the lack of or poor education, job discrimination and the ability to adapt to life outside of prison.

This paper will focus on the potential benefits of rehabilitation and support programs for ex-offenders and the larger society. This includes discussion of relevant offender education, opportunities for gainful employment and means of adapting to society. Each of these will assist the felon in successful living and will contribute to the reducing the rate of recidivism.

In criminal rehabilitation, prisoners are given opportunity to increase their content knowledge base. This is essential as research studies show that many inmates do not have basic grade school education (Astbury, 2008). This lack of education can hinder them in acquiring for jobs, making them then turn back to a life of crime (Shewan, 2000). Basic criminal rehabilitation programs ensure that there is a standard level of literacy amongst the inmates who sign up for the course (Belenko, Foltz, Lang, & Sung, 2004).
A lack of education among inmates poses a substantial obstacle. Inmates in Florida prisons tested at a median grade level of 6.9, with 64 percent scoring less than ninth-grade literacy skills, according to the Florida Department of Corrections 2006-07 Population Report (Middlemass, 2006).

Inmates with poor education are likely to have lower paying jobs. Until they acquire the education and job skills to compete in society for better paying employment, they will be tempted to see if they can make crime pay (Shewan, 2000). Education is also being offered within the prison to allow the prisoners to upgrade and stay relevant to the changing society outside the prison walls (Day, 2006).

Felons have limited rights relative to employment due to their high risk profile (Brenner&Caste, 2003). Private employers and government agencies can inquire into a job applicant's criminal record, conduct criminal background checks and take information relative to a felony conviction into consideration (Murphy, 2002). While there are job placement programs in place for felons, there is no real enforcement or help provided (Ward&Brown, 2004). They are given very little to work with when they get out, and the line of companies that refuse to hire felons is quite long (Ward&Brown, 2004).

Many employers except for banks will still hire convicted felons as long as remorse and rehabilitation are shown (Manza, 2003). The military has also been accepting a number of ex-convicts since 2006 (Middlemass, 2006). In order to join the armed forces, an ex-felon would require a waiver from the Secretary of Defense (Murphy, 2002).
Many convicted felons go back to school and complete a college degree. The only stipulation concerning being a convicted felon with a drug charge constitutes the individual not being eligible for any type of US government assistance like financial aid (Manza, 2003).

Successful, positive forms of rehabilitation can help to reduce the number of repeat offenders who return to jail after being unable to adapt to life outside of jail. This treatment has also been proven to help to solve some of the more serious cases, such as sexual offenders who may continue in their ways after being released (Ward&Brown, 2004).

Sixty-five percent of Florida’s felons are repeat offenders (Middlemass, 2006). This poses a major strain and obscurity to society. The idea of releasing prisoners who might be repeat offenders is a threat to social safety. So the government has spent thousands of dollars keeping a close watch on these possible repeat offenders as well as maintaining the prison systems (Murphy, 2002).

Rehabilitation also attempts to enhance inmate’s social adjustment. Psychological assessments are used to test for mental or physical disabilities that may have contributed to their committing crimes that led to their incarceration (Astbury, 2008). Should the inmates be ready and willing to accept counseling and assessment, many of them are able to return to society as relatively well-balanced individuals (Murphy, 2002).

For drug addicts, this is a pertinent issue, as many of them are struggling with addiction problems. Counseling would help to balance inner dynamics that led to the addiction, and possibly the criminal behavior that financed the addiction (Birgden, 2004).
Criminal rehabilitation has many positive benefits that can impact the lives of many convicted felons as well as their families by giving them the self confidence to be a productive member of society and to show their families that they are ready to turn their lives around (Day, 2006). Rehabilitation can help with wider social issues as well, such as reducing discrimination and stigma by allowing the felons to regain self confidence so that they will be able to prove themselves to society (Day, 2006). While it is hardly realistic to expect society to gather too much sympathy for convicted felons, the difficulty that former prisoners face in reentering society as productive citizens does evaluates the state of Florida’s justice system. Since prisons in Florida are meant to prepare the non-law-abiding citizen for successful reentry into the general population, where can Americans find any sort of indication that the current system is working (Ward&Brown, 2004)?

Out of the states that are searching for ways to cut rehabilitation spending, Florida is currently spending more on prisons than public education. Instead, re-strategizing could mean finding ways to use current funds more productively. This is useful in a manner that reassures Americans that prisoners reentering general population are qualified to do so.

Issues with finding proper rehabilitation for convicted felons in Florida make it extremely hard for them to make a living for themselves and for their families as a result of improperly funded programs (Shewan, 2000). In some cities in Florida such as Miami and Fort Pierce, rehabilitation efforts are not improving in response to high recidivism rates and therefore the public fears for the safety of their community. These same problems that we are experiencing within some of our cities are the same type of problems that we are experiencing within our state prisons. The more recidivism, the more overcrowding there is in prison (Manza, 2003). According to the *Miami*
Herald, this year Florida will dismiss close to 850 prison workers in an effort to cut $250 million dollars in rehabilitation spending (Birgden, 2004).

Offering rehabilitation and making it a mandatory process into post prison releases would contribute to a convicted felon adjustment into society. The Associated Press reports that Florida is beginning to apply more effort to rehabilitating prisoners to enable inmates to function better in society upon release and avoid recidivism (Birgden, 2004). Florida’s determination to promote prisoner rehabilitation by offering inmates educational opportunities is a positive step that may restore many prisoners to wholesome living and reduce the state's crime rate, thereby protecting citizens and saving tax dollars (Murphy, 2002).

For almost three decades, Florida politicians have belittled efforts to rehabilitate inmates as ineffective mollycoddling (Birgden, 2004). Now with states under persistent economic stress and evidence showing that most inmates are re-arrested within three years of release, lawmakers across the country are acknowledging the need for change (Shewan, 2000). There is now broad agreement that locking up offenders has been far from a cure-all for crime.

With bipartisan support, the state of Florida is shortening criminal sentences, restoring early release for good behavior, diverting drug offenders to treatment and sprucing up efforts to help parolees rejoin society (Shewan, 2000).

In Congress, a Republican senator named Charles B. Rangel from Florida introduced the Second Chance Act, which would dedicate millions of federal dollars to helping ex-convicts find jobs, housing and treatment for mental illness and addiction (Scott, 2010). This act would permit expungement of records of certain nonviolent criminal offenses.
The Second Chance for Ex-Offenders Act of 2009, amends the federal criminal code to allow an individual to file a petition for expungement of a record of conviction for a nonviolent criminal offense if such individual has: never been convicted of a violent offense and has never been convicted of a non violent offense other than the one for which expungement is sought; fulfilled all requirements of the sentence of the court in which conviction was obtained; remained free from dependency on or abuse of alcohol or a controlled substance for a minimum of one year and has been rehabilitated to the court's satisfaction, if so required by the terms of supervised release; obtained a high school diploma or completed a high school equivalency program and completed at least one year of community service (Scott, 2010).

According to the *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, rehabilitation programs do not address the needs of acute mental patients who often suffer in solitary confinement in prisons because of the severity of their mental state (Astbury, 2008). Florida and forty-eight other states shared and received $100 million in federal aid designed to finance programs that gives ex-convicts education, job and life skills training and substance abuse treatment with careful monitoring (Shewan, 2000).

In announcing the grant awards July 16, 2007, Attorney General John Ashcroft said re-entry programs aid in making sure these individuals will not return to a life of crime, (Ward&Brown, 2004). The grants are part of the Justice Department's Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative. The environment of prison in itself is stressful, and inmates with poor impulse control, anger management, mental health issues and true criminal behavior pose ongoing problems. By offering counseling and education, society helps reduce stress and lower the probability of recidivism (Ward&Brown, 2004).
There are some programs in Florida that aid in Rehabilitation and have been proven to be successful such as; the Marion County Jail's M.I.T.E. (Men in Transformation Education) program, The Federal Bonding Program and Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) program. The successes in these rehabilitation programs that are offered in some jails lend support to the state prisons for development of similar programs for their prisoners as well (Birgden, 2004).

The M.I.T.E. (Men in Transformation Education) program assists in the rehabilitation of inmates learning to deal with their problems through counseling, public speaking and community service in order to help prepare them for integration back into society as a productive citizen (Day, 2006).

The Federal Bonding Program helps ex-offenders and other at-risk persons with questionable backgrounds to secure jobs through the Work Opportunity Tax Credit by way of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996. It provides employers an incentive to hire target group members with barriers to employment (Shewan, 2000). Employing qualified target group members can reduce an employer’s federal income tax liability. At the end of the tax year, the employer can claim a credit up to $2,400 (Manza, 2003).

The concept behind COSA is to surround the offender with at least three community volunteers who begin meeting with the inmate while he or she is still incarcerated in order to help one prepare for life on the outside. After the offender is released, those volunteers meet with the offender on a weekly basis, providing help with such seemingly mundane tasks such as creating a household budget, opening a bank account and meeting new friends.
In conclusion, prisoners that are not provided with a decent window of opportunity for successfully reentering society, then any money invested in rehabilitating them while in or out of prison is wasted. Americans have to begin expecting more from our justice system, so that ultimately society can feel safer in their communities. Through proper rehabilitation and programs, ex felons should be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel by receiving proper education training for opportunities toward gainful employment and a better means for adapting into society.

As recidivism rates demonstrate, marginalizing our ex-felon population only perpetuates crime. If one does not come to expect and invest in a prison system that truly reforms prisoners, then ex-convicts will continually find it difficult to become a productive member of society.

Ultimately, Americans are hurting themselves in the end by crippling their convicts.
Bibliography


