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The Beliefs about Higher Education for Prisoners Through the Lens of Public Health Prevention

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Despite recent declines in the number of people incarcerated in the United States, in 2020 there were over 2,000,000 Americans behind bars (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). While most individuals will return to their communities upon release (Travis, 2005), the majority will be rearrested within 5 years of returning home (Durose et al., 2014). Incarcerated individuals are disproportionally poor, male, unemployed, and from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Carson, 2018; Erisman & Contardo, 2005). They are also one of the most educationally disadvantaged populations in the U.S., with a majority of those incarcerated in state prisons having less than a high school education (Duwe & Henry-Nickie, 2021; Harlow, 2003; Oakford, 2019), and many having high levels of illiteracy and disability (Klein et al., 2004). Limited education is a risk factor for both initial incarceration (Lochner & Moretti, 2004) and later recidivism (Bozick et al., 2018; Esperian, 2010).

Educational programming in prisons, especially opportunities for individuals to earn an Adult Basic Education (ABE) Certificate, a General Education Development (GED) Certificate, or learn a marketable trade, is viewed by many as a vital preventative intervention that promotes rehabilitation, increases post-release employment opportunities, and prevents recidivism. However, the general public is divided over the degree to which incarcerated individuals should be provided opportunities to participate in college-level coursework, also known as post-secondary education programs (PSCE) (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Page, 2004; Robinson & English, 2017).

Many colleges and universities (hereafter referred to as colleges), especially those that have as part of their mission dedicated to serving the underserved, have partnered with correctional institutions to offer PSCE. In March 2018, Elizabeth Hinton, an Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Harvard University authored a provocative article in the New York Times (NYT) asking readers to consider if prisons should be converted into colleges (Hinton, 2018). She suggested that readers consider prisoners studying "climate science and poetry." Citing the link between mass incarceration and "mass undereducation," Hinton (2018) articulated that "expanding educational opportunities to prisoners as a way

to reduce recidivism and government spending has again gained momentum" (p. 1).

New York Times readers expressed strong responses to Hinton's proposal. In almost 500 written responses, readers expressed opinions on a range of related topics, including issues of diversity in higher education, justice for prisoners and victims, for profit-prisons, collateral punishment, and primary and educational efforts that might curb mass incarceration. To better understand perceptions around providing PSCE opportunities to prisoners, we analyzed readers' written responses to Hinton's proposal.

The NYT has a wide reach, according to the Pew Research Center (2019), the NYT ranks in the top three reported circulated daily papers in the U.S. Examining reader comments may provide insights into the public's opinion about crime and justice. Enns (2016) argues that "public opinion can influence criminal justice policy" (p. 5). Politicians have a direct incentive to get reelected and will adjust their views and ultimately policy to stay aligned with the public's preference (Enns, 2016). For example, if the public holds punitive attitudes and has a preference for tough-on-crime policies, legislators and governors may be more likely to support more immediate responses to crime that focus on additional policing resources compared to investing in educational programming, inside or outside prison walls. In many instances, political actors may follow the public's lead on crime and thus budgetary allocations for education and job training in prison is in part a political response to the public's shifting priorities (Enns, 2016, p. 159). Lastly, in a college context, reader perceptions can offer insight valuable to higher education administrators considering the role of their institutions in providing service to this diverse and marginalized population as well as policymakers and penologists seeking to identify contemporary, evidence-based mechanisms to reduce, and even prevent, the human, financial, and social costs of mass incarceration.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Growth in PSCE increased significantly with the passage of the Higher Education act of 1965, which provided financial assistance for lower and middle-income students (including prisoners) through Pell Grants (Robinson & English, 2017). In the mid-1980s, approximately 90% of states offered PSCE (Ryan & Woodard, 1987). PSCE has expanded and contracted based on the prevailing political climate and public attitudes toward the purpose (rehabilitation versus punishment) of incarceration (Hall, 2015; Page, 2004).

Rising crime rates, which started in the 1960s and continued almost unabated through the 1970s and 1980s, ushered in a wave of fear in the U.S. about violent crime. Ultimately, this fear culminated in the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 ("the Crime Bill"). In addition to "tough on crime" approaches codified by this law, the Crime Bill overturned a portion of the Higher Education act of 1965 which allowed prisoners to access Pell Grant funding. According to Hrabowski and Robbi (2002), the American public felt that incarcerated persons were given "greater access to education at taxpayers' expense" (p. 97) through access to the Pell Grant. As a point of fact, however, in the year prior to the passage of the Crime Bill prisoners actually received less than one percent of Pell funding (Worth, 1995). Although the Crime Bill did not prohibit those incarcerated from participating in PSCE, it required them to use their limited financial resources to pay for such opportunities. The consequences of denying people Pell Grant eligibility included a decrease in PSCE programs, participation rates, and program options (Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996).

In 2008, the "Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety Through Recidivism Prevention'' (SCA),

signed by President George W. Bush, passed Congress with bipartisan support. The main purpose of the SCA is to fund programs that support the re-entry process for returning citizens. In addition to funding re-entry programs on the "outside," the SCA aims, "to provide offenders in prisons, jails or juvenile facilities with educational, literacy, vocational, and job placement services to facilitate re-entry into the community" (U.S. Congress, 2008, p. 2).

In December 2020, under the *FAFSA Simplification Act*, the U.S. Congress reversed an almost three-decade-old federal law prohibiting incarcerated individuals from using Pell Grants to finance their college education (Collins & Dortch, 2022). This reinstatement, poised to take effect on July 1, 2023, follows the successful Second Chance Pell (SCP) Pilot Program, first authorized under the Obama-Biden Administration in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The purpose of the SCP was to "allow eligible incarcerated Americans to receive Pell Grants and pursue postsecondary education with the goal of helping them get jobs and support their families when they are released" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), over 22,000 unique participants enrolled in the 2015 SCP and its subsequent expansion in 2020 (p. 1). The third expansion of the SCP, approved for the 2022-2023 award year (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), coupled with the reinstatement of access to Pell Grants for incarcerated persons under the *FAFSA Simplification Act*, will reduce significant financial barriers for incarcerated individuals wanting to participate in PSCE.

Despite over three decades worth of data substantiating the link between education during incarceration and reduced recidivism, the availability of, access to, and support of PSCE remains limited. Why, given the robust empirical findings supporting PSCE as one of the few evidence-based interventions that can reduce crime and is associated with other positive outcomes (Aos et al., 2006; Bozick et al., 2018; Novek, 2017), is PSCE not more widely adopted as a preventative success story by politicians, policymakers, and the public? A recent opinion piece published in the New York Times suggesting prisons be turned into colleges provides an opportunity to better understand current public opinion regarding one of the most promising (and controversial) rehabilitation programs – postsecondary correctional education—as a public health prevention effort.

METHODS

To determine readers' opinions on PSCE, we reviewed all published comments posted to Professor Hinton's March 2018 article (between March 7-8, 2018). The analysis of Internet "postings" or comments as a mechanism to conduct social science research has been addressed by multiple investigators (Holtz et al., 2012; Seale et al., 2010). Holtz and colleagues (2012), in their guide to analyzing Internet forums, identified both benefits and limitations of using Internet forums (which are similar to the reader comments section used in this study) for social science research. Some benefits include: 1) data may be viewed from the perspective of a "virtual focus group" with no interference from external investigators; 2) data are anonymous, which might result in more truthful responses; and 3) data are publicly available, which increases transparency. Limitations to using Internet forums for social science research include: 1) the self-selection of Internet forums limits generalizability; and 2) anonymity might result in participants making "more extreme or offensive" statements than they would in face-to-face interactions (p. 5). Additionally, Seale and colleagues (2010) identified limitations, including inequalities in access to the Internet as well as the inability of the researcher to ask follow-up questions of the participant.

In response to Hinton's NYT Opinion piece, there are 312 original reader comments ("parent posts") shared online by 304 unique users. There were 165 follow-up responses ("replies") to the original parent posts (range of 0 to 20 replies for each parent post). We downloaded the parent posts and replies (N = 477) into Microsoft Excel for data management. We read and re-read each parent post and reply(ies) multiple times and identified overarching, broad themes in the data related to public perceptions of PSCE. Using traditional

content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), we sorted each parent post and reply into broad categories. To gain a more nuanced understanding of readers' thoughts about PSCE, we used line-by-line coding of parent posts and replies to then identify meaningful categories and codes. The unit of analysis included parent posts and replies.

The general public is divided over the degree to which incarcerated individuals should be provided opportunities to participate in college-level coursework, also known as post-secondary education programs

In November 2020, the NTY boasted 7 million subscribers (Lee, 2020). The Pew Research Center (2012) identified that readers of the NYT tended to be younger (63% of readers were 18-49 years old), male (56%), highly educated (80% of readers were either college graduates or attended some college), affluent (only 26% earned less than $30,000/year), identify politically as democrat or independent (44% and 39%, respectively), and share a moderate or liberal ideology (35% and 36%, respectively). Further, overall, those who consume news online relative to print, skew slightly more male, younger, and not as wealthy (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). In terms of who is most likely to post comments, in general, they tend to be less wealthy and have lower levels of education (Stroud et al., 2016). Lastly, in research examining online commenting behavior on NYT articles, it was discovered that women are less likely to post online comments (Pierson, 2015). Any reader, regardless of subscription status, may comment on an article posted in the NYT. The NYT reviews and moderates all comments to ensure the comments are courteous and encourage readers to engage in "active discussions" (The New York Times, 2017, p. 1).

RESULTS

New York Times readers expressed five perspectives on Hinton's proposal to turn prisons into colleges: 1) Strong Support for Post-Secondary Education Programs in Prison; 2) Support for Education in Prisons, But Not Necessarily College; 3) Turning Prison into College is Imprudent; 4) Prevent Mass Incarceration and Fix Public Education; and 5) Cautionary Warnings Regarding College in Prison. Each perspective, presented in order of magnitude, is reviewed below.

Perspective 1: Strong Support for Post-Secondary Education Programs in Prison

Numerous readers believed PSCE had value, with one reader commenting, "This is, without doubt, the most brilliant idea to surface in a decade!" Another reader expressed, "I've wondered why they don't do this everywhere. You literally have a captive audience." Several readers felt that PSCE was not only a valuable way to improve post-release opportunities but that participation should be "required." One reader wrote, "A prison sentence should MANDATE a compulsory Bachelor's Degree....however long it takes." Another reader expressed that "parole [should be] contingent upon successful completion of courses." Similarly, a person commented, "With the right focus and resources, real change could be achieved with huge benefits to all."

Several readers described positive experiences teaching in PSCE. One reader described that they teach African American History in a high-security men's prison and have also taught in elite universities and colleges. Of their students in prison, they wrote, "I can say that I have never had better students… If my experience is anything to go by, there is a great deal of wisdom behind bars." Several formerly incarcerated readers shared their experiences of participating in PSCE. One such reader, incarcerated in 1967, noted that he was "surprised by the hunger for books and ideas… So why not tap this closeted energy? What's to lose making winners out of so-called 'losers'?

Readers cited education as a way to reduce recidivism, namely by helping returning citizens integrate back

into society upon release and develop the skills necessary to "improve their chances for success." Readers acknowledged that education was an "effective and positive change agent" with many believing that education would "cut the rate of recidivism drastically."

Numerous readers expressed that providing PSCE was an issue of social justice, and frequently condemned the "school to prison pipeline" with one commenter arguing "turning the prison into mandatory school detention class with room & board could be one way to compensate for the sin of a failed school system and built-in racial discrimination." Notions of racism and Jim Crow laws permeated many responses. In addition to race and ethnicity, other social issues, including family system issues, abuse, mental illness, and poverty, were recognized by readers as factors contributing to incarceration.

Several readers shared critical descriptions of prisons as "punishment machines", "torture chambers", and "violent, sadistic, environments" and called for prison reform. Within this context, PSCE opportunities were identified as an important reform effort. However, readers cautioned that for this type of reform to take place, a cultural shift away from our "deep-seated desire for revenge against the criminals" must occur.

Readers postulated that PSCE would serve not only incarcerated individuals but also faculty members. Readers raised several current practices in higher education that many colleges are grappling with, including the overreliance on part-time faculty members and the subsequent ability of said faculty to earn a living wage and receive employment benefits.

> Think of the employment possibilities! In today's financially stultified academic environment, universities would rather pay the very low salaries of TAs (teaching assistants) than the actual living wages of professors. … As a result, qualified college teachers are notoriously under-employed and under-paid.

Perspective 2: Support for Education in Prisons, But Not Necessarily College

Although numerous readers expressed enthusiasm for PSCE, many felt that offering college level coursework was not the best approach for this population. Hinton asked readers to "Imagine if prisoners sat in classrooms learning about climate science or poetry." Readers criticized these educational foci as lacking "value" and being "nonproductive" as a "prison subject." Readers argued that this type of education would not result in a job upon release, with one reader reflecting, "What the hell is an ex-con going to do with a degree in poetry?" Another reader shared, "Climate science studies may be good for the very few intellectuals but maybe solar panel installation training classes make more sense for most… Poetry is a hobby."

While many readers expressed negative opinions of prisoners engaged in a humanities-based PSCE, a few readers expressed that there was value in prisoners studying the liberal arts and that there was a danger in limiting their education to only task-oriented training. For example, "We can't simply train people to do a task. We also have to let them train their imaginations to see a different and better life for themselves than the one that got them into prison in the first place."

Readers cautioned that college is often viewed as a "simplistic answer to every problem", especially by a "center-left upper-middle-class demographic." Readers shared that "college is not for everyone." In lieu of traditional college courses, readers suggested that many prisoners would benefit from educational offerings that allow them to earn a GED or learn a marketable trade. Readers suggested that prisoners learn the skills necessary to earn a living wage, with trades like car repair, computer data entry, agriculture, bricklaying, tile installation, drywall, electrical, carpentry, cleaning, welding, plumbing, and painting mentioned by various readers.

Readers expressed that incarcerated individuals should learn "soft skills", such as "forward and backward planning, effective communication, interviewing, time management, prioritizing and dealing with setbacks [that are] critical for success in any job." Readers also shared that prisoners needed to learn "the stuff that regular working people have to do" with examples like "interview[ing] for a job, handle[ing] money, and pay[ing] bills" identified as important.

Several readers described that incarcerated individuals should learn information about and skills broadly linked to addressing their own mental health needs. Readers, recognizing the high rates of trauma exposure among incarcerated individuals, shared that incarcerated persons should learn about the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). One commented, "Prisoners often have the highest ACE scores of all. It is unsurprising that those traumatized as children can have maladaptive habits as adults." Another reader shared a similar perspective stating "HEALING MUST go on in prisons and as we know there is very little of that going on."

Perspective 3: Turning Prison into College is Imprudent

While many readers expressed favor for PSCE, many expressed opposition to such efforts. Readers described this proposal as "insulting", a "pathetically stupid idea", "mind-boggling in its absurdity" and "so ridiculous as to almost be offensive." Opponents of Hinton's proposal cited multiple reasons for the opposition.

One of the most common reasons readers opposed PSCE was fear that access to PSCE would incentivize and reward criminal behavior. One reader shared, "At some point, it does need to 'not pay' to be criminal." Several readers cited related examples, including anecdotal stories of individuals committing crimes to receive "complimentary healthcare on the taxpayers' dime." One reader wrote, "This "College for Prisoners" would only encourage people without college degrees to go out and commit crimes just to get a free education. Forget it." Readers thought that PSCE would result in a "skyrocket in crime" and several mocked the proposal.

> I struggled through four years of high school to maintain my GPA, spent a fortune on test prep classes to get a decent SAT score, got into a good college and now I'm 70K in debt. You're telling me I should have just knocked over a liquor store?

Readers expressed that PSCE, in particular free coursework, was unfair to all "honest" and "law abiding" citizens. As one reader commented, "Hard-working Americans operating within the law have more right to free education." Readers were quick to link the proposal of college education within a correctional setting to the author's academic affiliation (Harvard), liberalism, and lofty, out of touch, "ivory tower", utopian thinking. One reader wrote, "Are we to the point now that inmates have access to more opportunities than lawful citizens? Sounds like more Ivy League unicorn speak."

Readers expressed that "law abiding, working class citizens" should be able to attend college for free before "thugs who have murdered, robbed, raped get free college, and room and board." Other readers, including those with considerable student loan debt, expressed lack of support for providing college level coursework in correctional settings noting "Students are walking away with large amounts of debt in order to graduate--shouldn't people who haven't committed any crimes get the first pass at free college education?"

Related, readers expressed their opposition to PSCE because they felt that prisoners were undeserving (or at least less deserving than "those who behave decently") of the "privilege" of a college education. Prisoners were referred to as "dysfunctional human beings", "miscreants", "thugs", and "losers" and not worthy of education stating, "keep the criminals busy making license plates and weaving baskets but they haven't

earned the right for undergrad or grad studies."

Some readers were more nuanced in their approach to PSCE, noting that they supported education for some, but not all, prisoners. Readers expressed their lack of support for PSCE for violent offenders. One reader, whose brother was murdered in 1987, commented, "I'm not against prison education systems, but violent offenders and other offenders are in different categories." Similarly, another reader also felt that individuals who had been convicted of a violent crime should not receive education while incarcerated.

Some readers thought that this proposal lacked merit as this was "a hopeless proposition and would just enable them [career criminals] to commit crimes with a good education." Another reader shared that this opportunity would be a waste of time, noting, "Beyond minor drug offenders the harder inmates would be a waste of teacher time and talent and likely be a danger to others." Still another advanced this position to the extreme, noting that this opportunity might be acceptable for a "first timer" but any subsequent convictions should result in "execution" as it is "the least expensive and safest, for all, solution… Why waste good money on losers?"

While many readers expressed negative opinions of prisoners engaged in a humanities-based PSCE, a few readers expressed that there was value in prisoners studying the liberal arts and that there was a danger in limiting their education to only task-oriented training

Several readers expressed disinterest in having their tax dollars fund PSCE, especially when they considered their own need to pay for their children's college and their own retirement planning needs. One reader shared, "Money. Money. Money. This taxpayer is taxed out as I suspect most middle-class taxpayers are." Another reader made the distinction between using tax dollars to finance PSCE versus financing trade opportunities, noting, "I am saving for both my kid's education and my retirement. Teach inmates a trade, sure! Superior education on my dime, thanks but no thanks!"

Perspective 4: Prevent Mass Incarceration and Fix Primary and Secondary Public Education

The link between inadequate primary and secondary (K-12) public educational opportunities and later incarceration was a reoccurring perspective shared by readers. Readers overwhelmingly argued that in addition to (and sometimes in lieu of) funding PSCE, adequate resources should be invested in improving K-12 public education. Readers described our current "tough on crime" approach of incarceration as being inadequate and instead argued for crime prevention approaches.

> Being "tough on crime" may SOUND tough, but is in real life the weakest approach possible, as it doesn't protect citizens from becoming victims at all, it merely punishes criminals AFTER they already attacked their victims. The only serious way to be tough on crime, is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Of this preventative approach, one reader commented, "Most kids don't grow up wanting to be criminals; let's invest in education that's going to keep them out of prison in the first place."

Readers shared that funding education "from the ground up" was an economically sound and compassionate approach to preventing mass incarceration and would "put a massive dent in the prison-industrial complex." Another reader identified that investment in "future prisoners" was also a key prevention strategy in the efforts to reduce mass incarceration and slow the school to prison pipeline for "at risk" populations. In speaking about this preventative approach, readers identified individuals they believed were most "at risk" for later incarceration. For example, "How about we take all the future convicts, those children born

out of wedlock… and save their lives before they descend further into poverty, drug use and the related drug crimes which send most of them to prison?"

Readers expressed their beliefs as to why the U.S., despite evidence pointing to the cost-effective nature of investing in K-12 public education over incarceration, has not invested appropriate resources in public education. One reader posited that leaving a certain segment of our population uneducated benefitted some employers looking for "cheap labor" and politicians "wanting an unquestioning base."

Perspective 5 – Cautionary Warnings Regarding College in Prison

Interestingly, readers, sometimes as part of their positive response to Hinton's proposal, shared their concerns about the actual implementation of PSCE, especially the potential for prisoners to be subject to predatory and discriminatory practices post-release.

While many readers supported the idea of PSCE, they also warned that prisoners might be taken advantage of by "predatory colleges" (for-profit colleges that provide coursework and degree offerings of questionable rigor, quality, and value and often leave students in debt). Another reader explained this risk:

> Predatory "for profit colleges" are just waiting to prey on a new population, signing prisoners up for online courses they may or may not be prepared to take. The game is taking advantage of the Pell Grant money… take the money and run, and if the student drops out, the debt stays with the student and so they could get released from prison with one more strike against them, student debt.

Several readers expressed skepticism that simply having a college education and/or degree would result in improved job prospects for returning citizens. Readers cited the potential for returning citizens to experience discrimination related to their criminal records and racial and ethnic minority status. While acknowledging the goals were well intended, readers reasoned "Racism and prejudice still trump the education and skills and training they have received while incarcerated…." and highlighted the need to address "racial discrimination in employment, not to mention the reluctance of employers to hire ex-cons, a degree is just something to hang on the wall."

DISCUSSION

Readers expressed multiple positions on PSCE, many of which hightlight PSCE (and other educational opportunities) as promising ways to prevent the public health crisis of mass incarceration. The public health literature articulates three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Institute of Medicine, 2002). Primary prevention seeks to prevent a disease or condition before it occurs (e.g., the use of vaccinations to prevent illness). For our analysis, primary prevention efforts aim to prevent initial incarceration. Secondary prevention attempts to prevent continued illness or disability. For our analysis, secondary prevention efforts aim to prevent recidivism. Tertiary prevention includes efforts to limit further progression of illness or disability (Institute of Medicine, 2002, p. 376). For our analysis, tertiary prevention efforts aim to address the long-term consequences associated with long or life sentences.

Primary Prevention

While many readers supported the idea of PSCE, many suggested that a critical way to prevent recidivism was to invest in efforts that reduced the likelihood of ever being incarcerated (primary prevention). The most common primary prevention effort identified was the need to invest in quality K-12 education, especially for children living in neighborhoods with underperforming schools and high rates of

incarceration. Research supports this view. Jackson and colleagues (2016), in their examination of the impact of finance reforms targeting public school spending in 28 states, found that increased spending on education resulted in improved outcomes, including improved graduation rates and adult income. A 10% increase in per-pupil spending over all 12 years of school resulted in an increase in graduation rates and adult earnings, and a reduction in adult poverty. Improvements in graduation rates and adult income were most pronounced for low income students. Investigators argued that how additional resources are spent matters, with spending that results in "some combination of reductions in class size, having more adults per student in schools, increases in instructional time, and increases in teacher salary" (Jackson et al., 2016, p. 211) serving as important mechanisms of improved student outcomes.

Secondary Prevention

Although many readers supported education as a way to prevent future recidivism (secondary prevention), some shared the opinion that educational opportunities should be broad in focus, including opportunities to participate in GED opportunities and trade-based coursework during confinement. Comments favoring programing aimed at technical skills over PSCE programing might be due to more general shifts in both support for helping returning citizens and the emphasis on career preparation in higher education. First, since the mid-2000's there has been increased interest in prisoner reentry, which has stimulated major initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for returning citizens (Travis, 2007). Part of the reentry movement coincided with a preference for prison reentry programs aimed at vocational training as opposed to more intensive, expensive, broader based educational programing (Lynch, 2000; Phelps, 2011). Second, during the 21st century there has been an increasing emphasis on modifying university curricula to prepare students for specific careers and ensure better job prospects (DiConti, 2004). Taken together these shifts might help explain why some might view teaching "climate science or poetry" as a less attractive alternative to learning a trade.

While PSCE might benefit some prisoners, many have not yet completed high school. From this perspective, though all returning citizens are at risk for recidivism, the largest population that could benefit from educational initiatives are those who need to complete secondary education. Addressing those who need secondary education would "move the entire distribution of risk to lower levels to achieve maximal population gains" (Institute of Medicine, 2002, p. 48). But, an individual's risk of recidivism cannot be viewed in isolation. This involves not just looking at the individual's risk factors, but the larger population-based risk factors, which might include a multitude of factors (educational policy, criminal justice policy, discrimination, poverty rates, etc.).

Despite research supporting PSCE as an intervention that reduces recidivism, a segment of the general public is not in favor of providing PSCE to prisoners. For some, this resistance is based on beliefs that the primary purpose of prison is punishment. Despite some reforms in the criminal justice system, the U.S. is still a punitive society (Enns, 2016). Unlike many Scandinavian countries where correctional systems are seen as a tool for rehabilitation via daily programing and those incarcerated are encouraged to seek educational opportunities, the U.S. tolerates harsh punishments and the denial of programs to those incarcerated (Pratt, 2008; Ward et al., 2013). For others, opposition is based on beliefs regarding where in the hierarchy of social order prisoners belong. These readers ascribed to the position of "lesser eligibility" (Sieh, 1989), the belief that "the standard of living within the prison must be below the minimum standard of living for those who live outside the prison" (Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1968, as cited by Sieh, 1989).

Tertiary Prevention

Few readers commented on how prison education, broadly defined, might serve as a tertiary prevention effort (prevention of long-term sequelae and disability associated with a chronic illness). In this case, the "chronic illness" is long-term incarceration (e.g., life sentences). Research supports that prison education

reduces infractions within the prison (Anders & Noblit, 2011). More broadly, prison education can promote "prosocial norms" which can help reduce the process of prisonization (Harer, 1995). One correctional officer noted that prison education, "gives prisoners something to do" and "it reduces tensions, and anything that reduces tensions has got to be good for them and for us" (Esperian, 2010, p. 328). Similarly, Newman (1993) noted that prison education "makes life behind bars more tolerable for inmates (and indirectly more tolerable for their keepers)" (p. 75). More attention should be paid to the impact of providing prison education to prisoners serving long/life sentences. It is possible that providing education to this population might result in lower prison costs as a result of fewer infractions, reduced security needs, and reduced health expenditures. These individuals might also serve as positive role models, mentors, and even teachers to new prisoners who will ultimately be released back into their communities.

LIMITATIONS

First, results might not be generalizable across all populations. As noted, the readership of the NYT is known to have higher levels of education and economic means than the general population. Related, we recognize that had Hinton's proposal been published in an alternative publication with different readership, readers might have proffered different responses to Hinton's proposal, which might result in different findings. Second, because the NYTs reviews and moderates all reader comments and censors name-calling, personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, and profanity it is possible that some reader comments went unpublished and thus were not included in our analysis. Finally, because we used data that were submitted in response to a NYT article, follow up interviews to clarify responses were not possible.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Institutions of higher education need to ensure that their campuses (both on the ground and virtual), faculty, and students are ready to recognize returning citizens as unique individuals, legitimate students, and community members (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). Colleges that enroll prisoners through PSCE opportunities while in prison, particularly credit bearing opportunities, must be willing to invite academically qualified PSCE students to enroll in their institutions upon release. Colleges must also proactively consider and budget for academic, social, economic, health, and vocational support returning citizens might need once enrolled in college outside the confines of prisons. It is likely that this population of students (like traditionally underrepresented student populations) would benefit from programming aimed to increase successful college transition (Holland, 2010). Furthermore, it is likely returning citizens will require more intensive academic and student life resources than students who have not been involved in the criminal justice system.

Reader feedback provides useful information that can help higher education leaders and policy makers strategically frame their argument for PSCE with the general public. This is especially important in an era when the value of a college education is frequently called into question. First, while many academic leaders understand the value of a liberal arts education, many outside the academy are less convinced of the importance of a liberal education. While there are valid reasons to attempt to change public opinion on the value proposition of a liberal arts education, it is unwise to use the PSCE arena to advance this cause. The general public largely does not feel positive about prisoners studying topics they view as unimportant. That said, most colleges require students to complete a core curriculum, which is often liberal arts in nature, regardless of their degree program. When advocating for PSCE, academics and policy makers should emphasize the important outcomes afforded through this curriculum (e.g., critical thinking, effective communication, etc.).

More attention should be paid to the impact of providing prison education to prisoners serving long/life sentences. It is possible that providing education to this population might result in lower prison costs as a result of fewer infractions, reduced security needs, and reduced health expenditures.

Second, PSCE opportunities should be couched within larger efforts to make college affordable for all individuals, improve primary and secondary educational opportunities, and reform prisons. To advocate for PSCE only, fuels zero-sum thinking, which many readers expressed as they considered allocation of scarce resources.

Finally, we must continue to support practice and policy that addresses the social determinants of health, including those that serve as risk factors for incarceration. Despite the NYT liberal readership, several readers used blatantly biased language to describe justice involved individuals (e.g., thugs, losers, dysfunctional). Readers also described efforts with eugenic undertones to illustrate ways in which "future prisoners" could be reduced (e.g "Most prisoners probably come from homes with too many babies"). While these comments were less common among readers, their existence, especially in a "liberal" publication like the NYT, should concern justice involved individuals, advocates for prison reform, and policy makers.

CONCLUSION

Former United States Supreme Court Chief Justice, Warren Burger, noted in a 1981 speech to the American Bar Association, "We must accept the reality that to confine offenders behind walls without trying to change them is an expensive folly with short-term benefits -winning battles while losing the war" (The New York Times, 1981, p. 00010). The call to turn prisons into colleges by Dr. Hinton provides an important opportunity to consider current public opinion on education for prisoners broadly, and PSCE specifically. Mass incarceration in the U.S. is a public health crisis that impacts some of our most vulnerable populations. Understanding the role of PSCE and other forms of prison-based education as primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention measures can help us address the enormous human, financial, and social costs of mass incarceration.

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