



Volume 27
Number 2
Spring 2000

Journal of Leisurability

Leisure Education as a Rehabilitative Tool for Youth in Incarceration Settings

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Journal of Leisurability, Volume 27 No. 2 (2000) pp. 27-34

In 1870, the first National Prison Association Congress passed a resolution identifying the goal of prisons to be rehabilitation of inmates. Prior to that time, the primary function of prisons was considered to be punishment for those who committed crimes, and protection for society. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, and carrying through the twentieth century, the role of recreation within prisons has often been debated. While some feel that prisons should be for punishment and therefore there should be no recreation made available, others considered the primary function of recreation programs to be a means of increasing productivity and controlling behavioral problems. Some felt that recreation was necessary in order to occupy the minds of inmates, thus crowding out the evil thoughts that motivated criminal activity, while others considered recreation to be an essential tool through which individuals' creative and expressive talents could be developed (Byers, 1884; Coddington, 1911; Johnson, 1989). Regardless of the motive, by the turn of the century, many correctional institutions provided access to a wide variety of recreation activities including sport, music, drama, and special interest clubs. Yet, as we enter the twenty first century, there are still many who feel that recreation services have no role to play within the walls of prisons.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship between the prevention/treatment of crime and recreation was clear in the minds of the early pioneers in the recreation movement such as Jane Addams and Joseph Lee. The central concern of many of these founders of the National Play Association, forerunner of the National Recreation & Parks Association, was the provision of safe, organized play experiences for children in the industrial areas as an alternative to juvenile delinquency.

Although the term leisure education was not scripted until later in the century, the concept of exposing people to recreation opportunities, and facilitating the development of the skills necessary to pursue personal avenues of interest, was apparent in the work of those early pioneers. However, it wasn't until half a century later, in 1957, that the concept of leisure education in correctional settings was clearly articulated:

Among the inmates of correctional institutions there are many who have no knowledge or skills which will enable them to make acceptable use of their leisure....They cannot play, they do not read, they have no hobbies. In many instances, improper use of leisure is a factor in their criminality. Others lack the ability to engage in any cooperative activity with their fellows; teamwork is something foreign to their experience. Still others lack self-control or a sense of fair play; they cannot engage in competitive activity without losing their heads. If these men are to leave the institutions as stable, well-adjusted individuals, these needs must be filled; the missing interests, knowledge, and skills must be provided. (Heynes, 1957, p. 73)

Throughout North America, more than a century after the rehabilitative mission of prisons was first established, the debate continues over the role of recreation and leisure services within correctional institutions. Meanwhile, professionals on both sides of prison walls continue to advocate for the inclusion of leisure education as the foundational component of recreation offerings within correctional institutions. The purpose of this article is to discuss the potential of leisure education to address the underlying factors identified in existing theories of crime. Leisure education holds particular promise for youth who may have never acquired the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that would facilitate their participation in meaningful socially acceptable forms of leisure pursuit. Furthermore, leisure education may be particularly useful for youth who are younger and hopefully more open to changing their lives.

Why Individuals Engage in Criminal Behavior

Understanding why individuals engage in delinquent or criminal behavior has long fascinated criminologists. Various theories have been developed over the years to try to explain criminal behavior. In some cases, there is a direct link between the ability of individuals to find satisfying ways to fill their free time and involvement in delinquency and crime. Some of the more common theories are listed below along with insight into how underlying factors could potentially be addressed through leisure education and access to meaningful recreation opportunities.

Strain Theory

This theory (Merton, 1938) suggests that individuals turn to delinquency when they cannot meet middle-class goals in a socially acceptable manner. Education is an example, where there is an expectation that all students will perform at certain levels based on middle-class values. Those unable to meet the expectations may become frustrated and seek satisfaction through pursuits they can access but which may be considered negative to society. Youth today are bombarded with messages about recreation through various modes of mass media. The forms of recreation featured, such as extreme sports or the latest technological toys, are not accessible to all youth for a variety of reasons. Through leisure education, individuals can identify appropriate goals for themselves and acceptable pursuits that are accessible to them and through which they can satisfy their personal needs as well as societal expectations.

Differential Association Theory

First put forward by Sutherland (1939), this theory suggests that individuals, especially adolescents, who primarily associate with others who engage in delinquent or criminal activity, come to value and accept participation in similar pursuits. Often youth value the sense of connection to, and acceptance by, delinquent others which may lead them to engage in pursuits with which they may not feel comfortable. Through leisure education, an individual can become involved in activities that would put him or her in contact with others who embrace socially acceptable values and norms. Through involvement with that group, for example members of a team or club, an individual may learn to enjoy involvement in an acceptable pursuit. The values likely to be stressed by coaches, leaders, and players are hard work, deferred gratification, and teamwork, all of which align more closely with the conventional values of society.

Social Control Theory

This theory (Hirschi, 1969) posits that delinquent activities occur when bonds to society are weak or non-existent, thus freeing individuals from having to behave in a socially-acceptable fashion. Such individuals lack a sense of attachment and commitment to societal institutions such as family, schools, churches, and communities. It is often that sense of attachment and commitment that prevents individuals from engaging in criminal pursuits. Without it, individuals are free agents able to pursue activities that the rest of society doesn't condone. One benefit often associated with various forms of leisure pursuits is that involvement helps to foster bonds; these bonds may be with family members with whom enjoyable activities are shared, the school for which one plays on a team, or the community in which one shares in meaningful pursuits. Through leisure education, one can learn to foster relationships based on shared leisure interests and experiences, through which a sense of attachment and commitment can be developed.

Stimulus-Seeking Theory

Delinquency is believed to be the result of individuals seeking a high level of sensory stimulation from their environment (Sales, 1971). Although certain forms of sport and outdoor adventure pursuits provide high degrees of stimulation for the participant, such activities are often costly, require a high degree of skill and specialized equipment, and are not readily accessible when and where individuals are interested in participating. For many youth, activities such as skateboarding could satisfy the need for stimulation, but communities often impose restrictions which limit the ability to provide the youth with the rush that they seek. The challenge for Parks and Recreation service providers is to increase access to stimulating activities that will satisfy the needs of youth and to provide them with the skills and knowledge to access positive and stimulating pursuits.

Boredom Theory

As the name suggests, this theory (Clinard & Wade, 1966) posits that individuals engage in leisure delinquent activity out of boredom. For a myriad of reasons, such individuals do not possess a broad repertoire of leisure pursuits, often due to lack of motivation, knowledge, attitudes, and/or skills which make opportunities accessible. Through leisure education, an individual can learn how to greatly enhance his or her leisure repertoire, and can make considerable strides in that direction.

These are some of the popular theories that have been put forth as explanations for delinquent and criminal behavior. In each case, leisure education can be employed as a tool to address the root of the problem that led to the individual choosing to engage in activities that are not generally considered to be acceptable to society. It is important to remember that there is not a single root cause of criminal behavior. As such, there is not a single intervention designed to satisfy the needs of all.

There are certainly cases in which an individual may have a satisfying leisure lifestyle that is completely unconnected to the nature of his or her criminal involvement. Therefore, such an individual may not benefit from leisure education in terms of life outside the institution. Such individuals may benefit greatly, however, from learning to adopt new interests within the confined setting, that can assist them to cope with the environment. Incarcerated individuals have reported that active involvement in sport can assist with the alleviating stress, while pursuing cultural interests such as painting and writing can assist with mental coping (Robertson, 1992).

Although leisure professionals can identify links between theories of crime and leisure, criminology literature has traditionally not considered the role of leisure in causing, or preventing, crime. Agnew (1990) identified factors such as seeking pleasure, fun, and excitement as motives for crime based on actual data provided by participants. In this research, he asked individuals themselves why they choose to engage in delinquent or criminal activity, rather than simply speculating as so many theorists had done previously. In the leisure literature, Curtis (1997) was one of the first to suggest that delinquent activity could be considered to be recreation. He coined the phrase "purple recreation" as an acknowledgement that activities that society considers unacceptable, particularly for youth, such as substance abuse and drinking could be considered recreation by participants, although considered to be over-indulgent and immoral to mainstream society.

The concept of "fun" being acknowledged as a motive for crime first received wide spread public attention during the Spring of 1989 through media attention focused on the case of a female jogger from New York who was violently assaulted by a group of adolescent males as she jogged through Central Park (Will, 1989). When police questioned the suspects later that evening, they admitted to having committed the crime, and claimed that they had done it for fun. Psychological testing of the youth did not reveal any significant abnormalities, leaving Parks and Recreation professionals to question why the youth chose to satisfy their need for fun in such a destructive manner.

Subsequently, a study conducted at the University of Oregon (Robertson, 1993) investigated why certain youth engage in criminal activity for fun, thrills, and excitement. A group of adolescent males with a history of involvement in delinquent and criminal activity for fun became involved in a comprehensive data collection process which examined all aspects of their life histories. The study concluded that the individuals found they were better able to satisfy their basic needs, which included experiencing a sense of connection to others, release of stress, and sensory arousal through delinquent activities rather than through those considered to be socially acceptable. In certain cases, individuals had very little leisure education and, as such, did not have extensive leisure activity repertoires; in other cases individuals had well developed skills but lacked the opportunity to participate in a given activity at an appropriate level in order to gain satisfaction. Contrary to popular belief, it was not so much the nature of a delinquent activity that attracted the youth as much as the structure of, and lack of access to, socially acceptable leisure pursuits that motivated them to seek alternatives.

Why Leisure Education in Correctional Institutions

The word leisure is derived from the Latin *licere*, which means to be free. The notion of leisure or leisure education associated with a correctional institution appears to be an oxymoron in that penal institutions are by nature, designed to restrict freedom. It is interesting to note, however, that for certain individuals, their freedom to choose meaningful leisure activities is severely restricted by a lack of fundamental leisure awareness and education. As such, they make choices that are considered to be socially unacceptable and become incarcerated as a result, which further restricts their personal freedom.

Recreation, which stems from the Latin *recreatio*, refers to recovery or restoration. As such, recreation fits well with the rehabilitative mission approved at the 1870 National Prison Association Congress. Inherent in the recreation concept, however, is the assumption that individuals once existed in a preferred state which had somehow been eroded, and to which they should endeavor to be restored.

Rehabilitation means restoration to a former capacity or position. In cases where an individual once pursued a lifestyle considered to be socially acceptable, this is an appropriate goal. Many youth who come into conflict with the law, however, have never maintained a lifestyle that society would consider acceptable or appropriate, often because they lacked the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to do so. A more appropriate goal, in such cases, would be the provision of educational and training opportunities that would enable an individual to pursue a lifestyle that is considered to be socially acceptable.

Within institutions, educational initiatives are generally focused upon preparing individuals for the workforce, with little attention being paid to how an individual spends his or her free time, which is when most acts of crime and delinquency occur. This, coupled with the fact that many incarcerated individuals find it difficult to obtain suitable employment upon release, further supports the need for leisure education programs. Through leisure education, individuals can develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to access and facilitate meaningful experiences in order to satisfy their personal needs in a socially acceptable manner.

The following is a list of benefits that can accrue through leisure education as reported at the National Crime Prevention Conference (Robertson, 1996). In each case, brief discussion is provided as to the particular application in an incarcerated setting:

Develop acceptable outlets for stress: Correctional institutions, by their very nature, are extremely stressful environments, for staff as well as the incarcerated individuals. In order to survive, it is important that individuals learn to identify and access socially acceptable ways to relieve stress. For many, this is through physical exertion but for others, cultural pursuits such as music, art, drama, and writing provide positive outlets. These interests and skills that are developed and serve the needs of individuals during the period of incarceration, can serve as useful mechanisms to help them cope with the daily stresses they will encounter once they return to society.

Identify activities which serve as alternatives to drug and alcohol addictions: A high percentage of youth who come into conflict with the law and are incarcerated experience drug and alcohol addictions. There are many factors that motivate an individual to become involved in the use of illegal drugs, one of which is perceived lack of alternative pursuits to satisfy the individual's needs. Through leisure education these needs can be identified, as can suitable alternatives. Youth who participate in treatment programs during incarceration, in order to lessen or eliminate their involvement with drugs and alcohol often find that they experience a significant increase in free time upon release. Even if their drug involvement was not related to boredom or a perceived lack of leisure alternatives, assistance with identifying meaningful pursuits during time previously devoted to the addiction can assist greatly with the rehabilitation process.

Foster interpersonal skills such as trust, cooperation, and teamwork: Many individuals within society could benefit from assistance in developing basic skills that enable people to live effectively in a communal fashion. It can be the lack of such skills that lead certain individuals to engage in activities not generally considered to be socially acceptable. Successful rehabilitation programs often require participants to develop interpersonal skills and leisure education can be a conduit to develop such skills. Identification of the need, and of specific interpersonal skills can occur through the leisure education process and involvement in certain forms of leisure pursuit. The development of such skills can enhance the individual's ability to function more successfully in other aspects of his or her life as well, not just leisure.

Enhance self-esteem through realizing success with a given pursuit: Low self-esteem is a characteristic of a segment of the incarcerated population. The basic nature of the correctional environment does little to foster self-esteem. The fact that these youth are incarcerated generally indicates that they have not been successful in their criminal activities. Many of these youth have experienced failure in other aspects of their lives as well including relationships and educational attainment. Yet, positive self-esteem is considered to be a critical personal accountability and respect for others, which are important goals of the correctional process. Self-esteem is also at the root of inner confidence that enables individuals to cope effectively with the challenges of life. Through leisure education, experiences can be facilitated to maximize the chances for success that can lead to enhanced self-esteem for youth.

Increase access to new social environments: Individuals are products of their environment to a large extent, but often youth have little control over the environments in which they reside. If their primary social connections are delinquent, there is a high probability that their activities could be delinquent in nature. Acquiring new leisure interests while removed from negative social situations can serve as a catalyst to accessing different, and in some cases, more positive social environments for such individuals upon release. For example, a youth whose social

environment consists primarily of delinquent family and peers can become involved with a broader range of others through participation in activities such as baseball, youth groups, and special interest clubs where positive values and social roles can be experienced.

Foster new interests: Although certain incarcerated youth may have a broad range of interests and skills that enable them to access positive leisure pursuits, many have a limited leisure activity repertoire. In some cases, they have a negative attitude toward many forms of leisure pursuit, even though they have not experienced the activities first hand. Leisure education sessions held during the period of incarceration can aid in identifying the source of the negative attitudes and fostering a more positive attitude towards a broad range of leisure pursuits. In other cases, individuals possess a positive attitude toward many activities but encounter multiple constraints attempting to access many existing opportunities. Certain barriers to participation can be removed in this controlled setting enabling individuals to experience interests not readily available to them in other settings. As well, the constraints negotiation component of the leisure education process can assist in identifying and overcoming specific constraints once they are released from the institution.

Develop awareness of persona/ needs and appropriate avenues to satisfy them: Much human behavior is motivated by social, psychological, and biological needs. Various forms of human activity including work, school, family involvement, church activities, and recreation hold the potential to satisfy similar needs. For example, achieving a sense of social connection to others could be achieved through each of the aforementioned settings, depending on the specific environment and relationships that exist within. Often, if a particular need can not be satisfied through one aspect of an individual's life, he or she may seek to satisfy it through another. Leisure is the one aspect of life over which an individual has the greatest control and therefore leisure has the greatest potential to satisfy a broad range of personal needs. When certain individuals are not able to satisfy their needs through socially acceptable means, they turn to delinquent or criminal pursuits. Therefore, assisting such individuals to understand their needs and identify accessible leisure pursuits as a means of satisfying them is an important aspect of leisure education programs for incarcerated individuals.

Discover ways to overcome specific barriers to participation: Certain youth become involved in delinquent and criminal activity when they are unable to access meaningful forms of acceptable leisure behavior. There are a myriad of social, psychological, and structural barriers which prevent access to leisure activities. Such barriers include negative attitudes, lack of skill, low confidence, insufficient financial resources, limited knowledge of available opportunities, low self-concept, and limited access to suitable partners to name but a few. Through the leisure education process, personal barriers can be identified and strategies developed to address each in a manner that is appropriate for the individual once he/she returns to the general population.

Develop decision-making and problem-solving skills: Incarcerated individuals often have never learned the skills necessary to be able to assess situations in a logical fashion in order to solve problems and make decisions that are not detrimental to their health or the health of others. Such skills can be developed through leisure education and practiced in situations such as planning a leisure activity, with the assistance of a trained leader. While in custody, individuals learn these skills and how to apply them in a group setting as so many decisions in life involve and impact others. Participants can experience, and process, the impact of their decisions that can then be applied to other aspects of their lives upon release.

Develop new interests that could evolve into a career such as writing, photography, or music: A large percentage of incarcerated youth have an unstable record of success in school. Many correctional institutions have vocational training programs through which participants develop skills in specific trades, but such programs rarely address the deeper psychological aspects which relate to life interests and personal needs. Many incarcerated individuals are highly creative and talented individuals, yet avocational programs often fail to recognize, or develop these skills. Accounts of delinquent and criminal activities often indicate a high degree of creativity on behalf of participants. Through leisure education, creative skills can be identified and channeled into pursuits such as music, writing, drama, crafts, and photography. Incarceration provides an opportunity for individuals to focus on developing their creative talents which will not only enhance their leisure lifestyle upon release, but could also lead to meaningful employment opportunities.

Conclusion

And so, in conclusion, one hundred and thirty years after it was determined that the process of incarceration would be one of rehabilitation, there are those who still question recreation services as having a role to play in such

institutions. Although certainly not established as country clubs, recreation services, and in particular leisure education, have a critical role to play in the rehabilitation process. Few would question the importance of positive recreation in the healthy growth and development of adolescents, in terms of mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Yet somehow, these same developmental factors seem less important and necessary for incarcerated youth, despite the fact that youth often come into conflict with the law because they lack the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that would facilitate them making more socially acceptable choices (Burke, 1940; Decker, 1969; Kraus, 1973; Robertson, 1993). Few would argue that all forms of recreation are appropriate for those who are incarcerated. However, forms of recreation that can aid in the process of returning the youth to society better able to use their free time, should be supported by those in both the recreation and corrections fields, as was the case when each of these movements began.

In particular, the process of leisure education, where youth gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to participate in meaningful forms of recreation pursuit appears to have an important role to play in the rehabilitative process for many incarcerated youth. Certainly the leisure education component of the recreation services program addresses many of the factors suggested in the popular theories as causes of delinquent behaviour, presented in the first section of this paper. Similarly, the benefits generally associated with leisure education programs identified in this paper could assist youth to not only withstand the stresses of institutional life, but to return to society better prepared to address and manage various aspects of their lives. Further research is required in order to better understand the causes and cures for delinquent behaviour, particularly related to the leisure education process in the lives of youth who come into conflict with the law.

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