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# Recreation or rehabilitation? Managing sport for development programs with prison populations



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## ABSTRACT

The provision of sport and recreation programs to inmates within the prison system provides a unique context to investigate the role of sport in enacting social change. Three main aims of prison-based sport programs have been identified in research: inmate health and wellbeing, inmate rehabilitation, and inmate management. This paper presents four case studies of sport programs in prisons across Australia. Inmates completed qualitative interviews in order to investigate program outcomes, design, and delivery. Although the participants in the four case studies came from substantially different prison populations (male, female, Indigenous, intellectual disability, general population) and geographic locations, there were key themes across the groups. Outcomes for both inmates and prisons tended to focus on inmate health and wellbeing and inmate management. Sport and recreation programs appeared to have a positive influence on inmates' health and behaviour; however, the efficacy of rehabilitation efforts through sport remains uncertain.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, prison populations throughout the world have increased exponentially (Walmsley, 2012). In Australia, similar to many other Western nations, there has been a substantial increase in the number of people receiving custodial sentences; in the last decade, there was a 30% increase in the prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011b), double the rate of general population growth during the same period (ABS, 2011a).

At the same time, sport has increasingly been used as a method of community development and engagement, including programs related to antisocial behaviour and crime reduction. Although there is an established body of research on sport programs aimed at decreasing antisocial behaviour and criminal activities (Coalter, 2007; Crabbe, 2000; Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, & Makkai, 2003; Nichols, 2004; Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006; Smith & Waddington, 2004), little research has been done on sport programs within correctional facilities.

This paper brings together data from two separate studies that contemporaneously examined the delivery of sport and recreation programs within four different prisons in Australia. The sport and recreation programs investigated were delivered by two national not-profit-organisations funded by government and philanthropic donations to provide a variety of opportunities for disadvantaged Australians. These programs aimed to use engagement with sport as a method of rehabilitating prisoners during their confinement, as well as facilitating possible reintegration into community sport

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programs upon release; an explicit aim of these programs was to institute a transition between a program and activity within the correctional facility to a similar program in the general community. The proposed outcome of these programs was to provide prisoners with a new group of peers and structured support, and in doing so, affect a decrease in recidivism.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an embryonic field of research by presenting four case studies that examine the management of sport activities in correctional facilities and the impact of these activities on prisoners and prison facilities. Each case study was developed using data collected by the authors during two large research studies, which examined the perceived impacts of organised sport and recreation activities on disadvantaged individuals and communities.

### 1.1. Research context

According to the ABS (2011b), approximately 29,000 adults were incarcerated in Australia in 2010, a national adult imprisonment rate of 166 persons per 100,000. Within the incarcerated population, the vast majority of Australian prisoners are male; female inmates represent only 7% of the total inmate population (ABS, 2011b). Whilst this ratio of male-to-female incarceration is common in many Western countries, it is worth noting that female incarceration rates have increased by 70% in Australia since 2001 (ABS, 2011b).

The incarceration rates of Indigenous Australians relative to the general population are also worth noting in the context of this study. The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that Australian Aboriginal people were the most imprisoned race in the world (Elliott, 1998). Australian Indigenous people currently represent more than 26% of the total inmate population (ABS, 2011b), but only 3% of the total Australian population (ABS, 2011b). This disproportionate number of Australian Indigenous people was also reflected in the sample for this study and is a particular issue to consider in designing and delivering sport programs.

The need for sport and recreation opportunities for prisoners is particularly germane in light of a recent study highlighting the poor mental and physical health of inmates in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011) found that at least 31% of all prisoners reported having a mental health issue; 4 out of 5 inmates smoked tobacco; approximately half of all inmates reported drinking alcohol at risky levels; and 2 out of 3 inmates had used illicit drugs within the last 12 months. Finally, Australia's recidivism rates have been increasing (Payne, 2007), which provides some evidence that current custodial sentencing practices are doing little to deter people from returning to prison. According to recidivism research in Australia, 2 out of 3 prisoners have previously been incarcerated, and between 35% and 41% of prisoners will return to prison within 2 years of being released back into the community (Payne, 2007).

The economic and social consequences of Australia's rapidly expanding prison population and high recidivism rates have increased pressure on governments and correctional facilities to develop informed policies and programs to rehabilitate prisoners. One of the notable responses has been to engage external sport and recreation providers—most commonly drawn from the not-for-profit or welfare sector—to work with inmates and corrections staff to deliver sport and recreation programs to inmate populations.

Over the last 40 years, prisoners detained in Western correctional facilities have been afforded greater and more regular access to organised sport and recreation activities (Carter & Russell, 2005; Elger, 2009; Hagan, 1989; Hayburn, 2007; Slater, Groves, & Lengfelder, 1992). In turn, these developments have prompted some investigation from academics and industry professionals alike (Calloway, 1981; Elger, 2009; Frey & Delaney, 1996; Gras, 2005; Hayburn, 2007; Leberman, 2007; Lewis & Meek, 2012; Medve, 1961; Slater et al., 1992). Despite an increased research interest, there is still a lack of sound evidence-based studies documenting the nature and efficacy of sport and recreation activities within the prison setting (Calloway, 1981; Elger, 2009; Lewis & Meek, 2012; Little, 1995; Meek & Lewis, 2014; Orton, 1977; Slater et al., 1992). The scarce research that has investigated sport and recreation in the prison setting has mainly been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom. Limited research has directly investigated the nature and efficacy of sport and recreation within the Australian prison setting (Cashin, Potter, & Butler, 2008).

Coalter (2007) noted that the debate about the relationship between sport participation and crime is divided into two key theoretical areas: (a) rehabilitation of offenders and (b) crime prevention or diversion. Although there are strong theoretical arguments for the potential contribution of sport to crime prevention and rehabilitation, there appears to be little empirical data to support these claims. Coalter (2007) argued that the fundamental problem with research into sport and crime is the widespread lack of clarity about the nature of outcomes and their measurement. In short, whilst assumptions about sport development programs as a tool for rehabilitation abound, there is an increased need to examine their efficacy in prison settings.

## 2. Literature review

Although there is a scarcity of literature pertaining to sport and recreation activities within prisons, a thematic analysis of available literature reveals that previous work has centred on three key themes: (1) health and wellbeing outcomes for inmates (Amtmann, Evans, & Powers, 2001; Elger, 2009; Meek & Lewis, 2012; Vaiciulis, Kavaliauskas, & Radisauskas, 2011), (2) the propensity of sport and recreation to aid in the rehabilitation process (Hagan, 1989; Leberman, 2007; Mahon & Bullock, 1991; Stumbo & Little, 1991), and (3) the use of sport and recreation activities as an offender management tool (Aguilar & Asmussen, 1990; Crutchfield, Garrette, & Worrall, 1981; Martos-García, Devis-Devis, & Sparkes, 2009; Medve,

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