

Restorative Leisure: Transitioning into the Community After Incarceration

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Prison remains an expensive and relatively ineffective aspect of criminal justice in Canada. Prison in Canada has an estimated recidivism rate of 27%, based on new offenses within two years of release (Hewitt, 2016). A contributing factor to high recidivism is a lack of meaningful opportunities for ex-prisoners to spend their time doing pro-social things. This post specifically addresses a lack of meaningful leisure.

Leisure is a fundamental part of the human experience: filling time in positive ways, engaging communities and promoting skill development in various areas. Although leisure has been widely accepted as an effective means to integrate marginalized members of communities, it remains largely inaccessible to Canada's ex-prisoner population. The Canadian criminal justice system is an isolating experience while parole conditions may prevent individuals from associating with the only people or places they have ever known. Lack of meaningful leisure activities promote further isolation, which may increase the likelihood of repeat offences.

Restorative leisure

Restorative leisure is a method of assisting ex-prisoners as they renegotiate their place in the community. The concept of restorative leisure is rooted in the ideas of social justice and restorative justice, which call for reconciliation between victim and offender as well as the coming alongside of community members to support strategies which prevent further crime (Government of Canada, 2019).

My research at Brock University suggests that restoration through leisure for ex-prisoners must involve four components: (1) Participation at their own free will; (2) Opportunity for introspection by the participant; (3) Engagement with a supportive community; and (4) Opportunity for completion of a task or activity. To understand the significance of a restorative leisure experience, one must understand what it means to be restored. According to the same research, restoration was characterized by four concepts: restoration as a process to be engaged in rather than a destination to be reached; restoration as a regaining

of a sense of identity; restoration as establishing a healthy relationship with respect; and finally, restoration as self-acceptance and making peace with oneself.

How leisure helps

Leisure contributed to the accomplishment of these restorative experiences in a variety of ways. Leisure was seen as a context for reinstated humanity as it allowed optimal arousal, feelings of safety and engagement in encouraging communities. Secondly, leisure promoted a sense of autonomy for ex-prisoners as they could try new things, develop skills and exercise freedom. Third, leisure promoted relationships between those who *have* experienced incarceration and those who *haven't*. These community relationships were made available through recreation and are largely motivated by shared interests and appropriate self-disclosure. Finally, leisure promoted beneficial physical and emotional outcomes for ex-prisoners such as improved physical fitness, improved emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and increased desire to give back to the community through volunteer opportunities (sometimes referred to as “virtuous leisure”).

Reintegration

My research suggests that **reintegration should begin upon entry to prison** rather than after release. Increased leisure awareness and opportunity for the currently incarcerated may contribute to better outcomes for ex-prisoners. Additionally, the community should be encouraged to engage with current and recently released prisoners to build meaningful friendships, and offer support, as well as contributing financially or otherwise to organizations supporting ex-prisoners. Reintegration could be improved by expanding parole plans to include restorative leisure as a fundamental component. Ultimately leisure can and should be a critical and alluring part of the experience of restoration.

For more information on this work, see <https://melissanicoletabet.wixsite.com/restorativeleisure>.