Technology in Prisons: Digital Access, Literacy, and Recidivism

by Alexander Rodriguez

[1]

Imagine being locked away with no tangible connection to the world outside prison, leaving you with nothing but a tablet to bridge this gap. For the majority of people in the United States, a life of technology has become the norm. For those in prison, a different story takes place.

[2]

Whether you are a student, a professional, or anyone who enjoys the convenience of modern technology, you likely take internet access, instantaneous communication, and education for granted.

In the past week, you may have logged into Canvas, opened Instagram, or watched videos on YouTube—all without a second thought.

[3]

For many incarcerated individuals in prisons across the United States, however, being able to just use the internet is considered a luxury.

In general, technology and internet access in prisons can make a big difference in whether someone returns to prison after being released. The term **recidivism** refers to such a case.

Charles Hale, a man who spent 48 years incarcerated, said that he "felt like a Neanderthal" after being released because he did not know how to power on a smartphone [4]. Experiences like Hale's show the extent to which the **digital divide** affects the prison population. The digital divide refers to a growing gap in **digital literacy** skills, which refers to an individual's ability to utilize technology effectively.
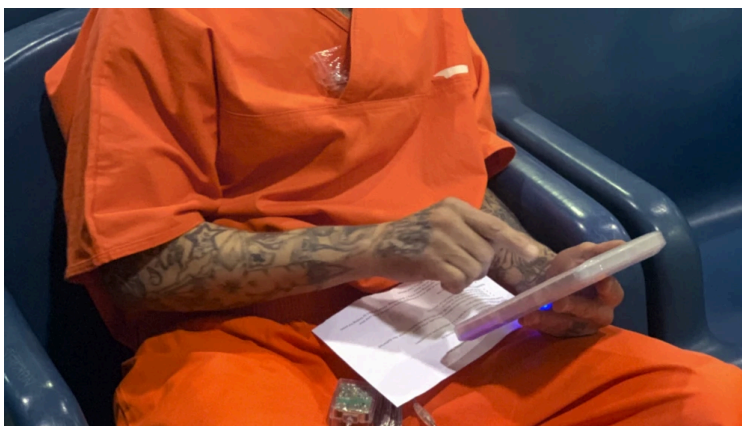
Prisons in the United States have very high recidivism rates. A 2021 study conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that across 24 states in 2008, 66% of people released from prison

were re-arrested within three years [5]. They also found that 61% of prisoners released in 2008 would return at least once by 2018 [5].

[6]

Opportunities for prisoners to learn, however, are directly opportunities to lower recidivism rates. An analysis by the RAND nonprofit corporation found that inmates who received vocational training and academic education were 43% less likely to recidivate: a 13% drop from those without training or education [7], [8].

[9]

For college education specifically, higher education attainment is significantly associated with lower recidivism rates, dropping to around 5% or less for people who earn a four-year degree while incarcerated [4].

Clearly, education is beneficial to reducing recidivism. But is it cost-effective for taxpayers to invest in the education of prisoners? RAND found that for every $1 invested into prison education,

administration could save around $4 to $5 on the costs of reincarceration [8], [10]. It is absolutely cost-effective to invest in prison education.

[11] Inmate Steven Parker showing off the bunk beds he
designed for a state park.

What about demand? Do prisoners even want to receive an education? Nicholas Linn, an inmate in Idaho interviewed by the Hechinger Report, said that "without the education piece, a lot of people, including myself, we're dirtbags…this is the first time I've ever felt like I had a chance" [11]. Steven Parker, another inmate at the same facility, said the prison career education programs are important: "We're doing something productive. It's made a change. It's made a difference" [11]. Statistically speaking, a 2014 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that nearly 21% of adults in all federal and state prisons were enrolled in postsecondary education programs [12].
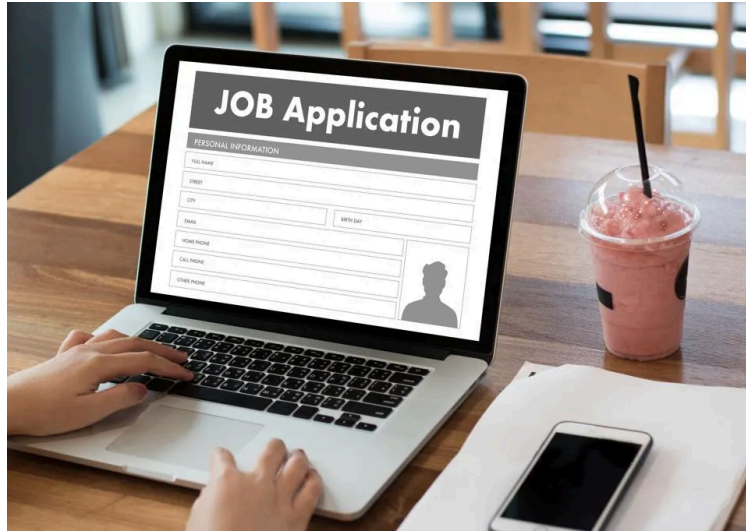
[13]

Okay, education is important in reducing recidivism rates. But how are technology and internet access even related? Well, these programs that allow prisoners to attain higher education are made possible through technology [4]. Learning management systems, like Canvas, may be used through which all coursework is completed, and internet access is necessary.

Poll results published by Politico in 2018 strongly suggest that the majority of Americans agree that the goal of the criminal justice system should be rehabilitating people to become law-abiding citizens [14].

[15]

Beyond formal education alone, digital literacy is essential for prisoners to reintegrate into society after release. In modern-day United States, online tools are used for job applications, banking, scheduling health appointments, and other daily tasks. There are people incarcerated who have never used the internet or a cellphone. These are the people who need the most support, as they typically struggle the most after being released.

Technology can also be used by prisoners to maintain communication with their family members. Prisoners who remain connected with their family after being incarcerated have reduced recidivism rates, and technology can help bridge this connection [16].
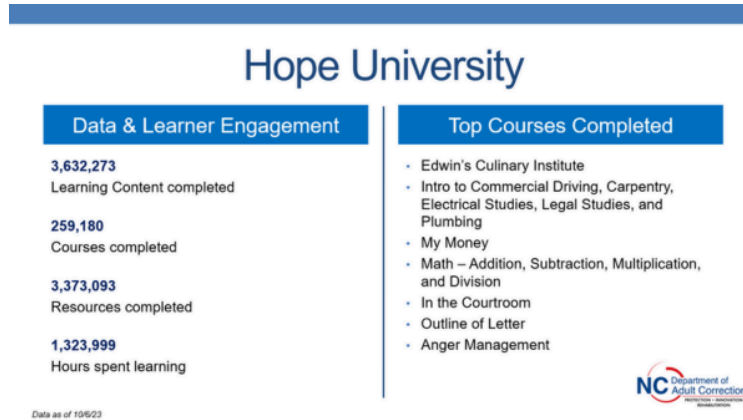
[17] Question asked by all job applications in the United States

In addition to the barriers already in place by the law and the stigma associated with being a formerly incarcerated person, a more hidden barrier exists with the digitization of all facilities. For instance, many employers choose to recruit employees online and expect online applications for even entry-level jobs—tasks that may seem impossible to a person with no digital literacy. As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals may become frustrated due to a lack of options and return to crime [4].

Technology in prison reduces recidivism rates. However, what can be done to actually implement this technology? Is it already being implemented? Are there any testimonies from prisoners who see results from some of these programs?

As of right now, many prisons and organizations have launched and supported programs to introduce internet and digital learning into prisons safely. These programs have aimed to do so by introducing regulated tablets, online courses, and even programming classes.
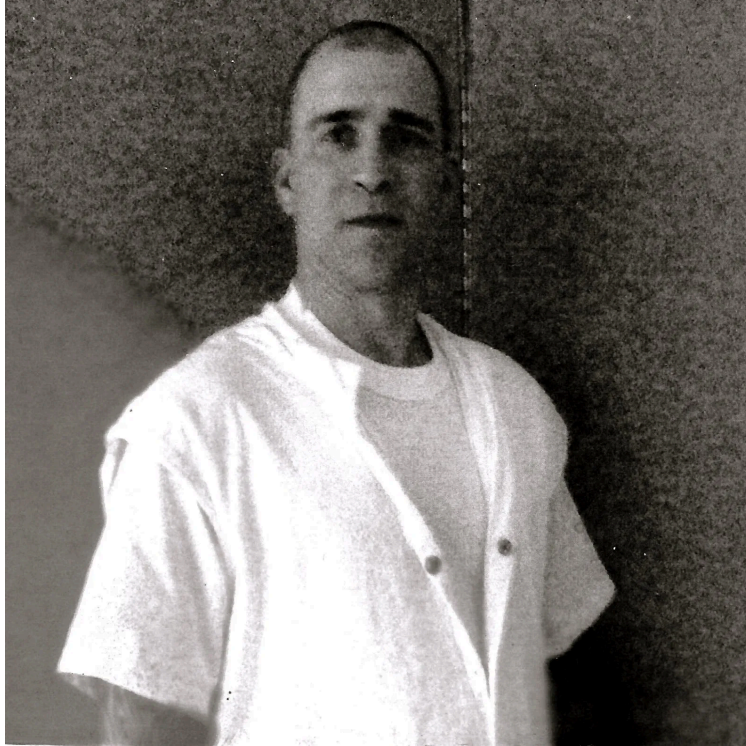
The Last Mile, a program that teaches programming and web development to inmates in offline computer labs, has reported a recidivism rate of under 5% of those who graduated from the program—far below the typical figure of 60% [18].

[19] Highlights of Hope University in 2023 of October

In addition to smaller programs, states themselves have begun working with programs to distribute tablet computers to inmates with educational software and limited internet access [9]. For instance, a program called Hope University in 2022 gave tablets to inmates across North Carolina. In just a single year, the prisoners completed 260,000 online courses, to a point where prison officials have stated that the tablets are reducing disciplinary issues in the prisons [9].

There are various accounts of prisoners directly supporting and valuing digital access. Ryan Moser, who served 11 years in a Florida prison, experienced the introduction of tablets during his time [10]. He states there are lots of advantages to the tablet because you can study wherever and whenever you want.

[20] A photo of J.S. Slaymaker

J.S. Slaymaker, a current prisoner in Texas, talks about his experience with tablets being rolled out in his prison in 2023. He described the tablets as "the best thing to happen in decades" and talked about how they provided educational materials, legal resources, and entertainment [21]. He also acknowledged that despite the apparent surveillance and microtransactions, the pros far outweighed the cons of the tablet for him [21].

A similar account from Juan Acosta, who spent 17 years in prison, said that picking up a smartphone was "foreign and overwhelming." He did not know what an app was or how to make calls [22]. He was afraid of failing to complete basic tasks like scheduling a doctor's appointment or applying for a job [22].

Overall, the conversation on whether technology and internet access should be welcomed across every single prison in the United States remains controversial, but there are still undeniable benefits to its usage. Programs like The Last Mile and Hope University and these countless experiences from prisoners who have been through these programs or simply used tablets all help make a case for increased access. Additionally, the statistics alone make a strong case: prisoners

who receive education are less likely to commit crimes again, and investing in these programs saves taxpayers money.

If you would like to learn about how Washington State handles technology in prison, consider checking the following links:

- https://www.doc.wa.gov/corrections/services/technology.htm
- https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/DDA/dda/documents/policy/policy13.06.pdf
- https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/WA.html

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[3] J. Montgomery, "How long is too long?: Mobile Phone Warrants and The Fourth Amendment." [Online]. Available: https://sites.suffolk.edu/jhtl/2019/04/11/how-long-is-too-long-mobile-phone-warrants-and-the-fourth-amendment/

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[6] C. International, "The Importance of Education for Prisoners." [Online]. Available: https://www.criminon.org/who-we-are/groups/criminon-international/the-importance-of-education-for-prisoners/

[7] G. Duwe and M. Henry-Nickie, "A better path forward for criminal justice: Training and employment for correctional populations." [Online]. Available: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-better-path-forward-for-criminal-justice-training-and-employment-for-correctional-populations/#:~:text=market%20statistics%20show%20the%20benefits,reduction%20in%20probability%20to%20recidivate

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[10] Corrections1, "New program will help inmates nationwide earn high school diplomas with tablets." [Online]. Available: https://www.corrections1.com/re-entry-and-recidivism/new-program-will-help-inmates-nationwide-earn-high-school-diplomas-with-tablets#:~:text=A%20meta,5%20on%20reincarceration%20costs

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Project Reflection

My final project was guided by the question: How does digital access and literacy in prisons impact recidivism rates? The answer I arrived at is that access to technology, education, and programs that improve digital literacy significantly reduces recidivism rates. Programs like The Last Mile and Hope University, which provide digital education to incarcerated individuals, have demonstrated that technology can be powerful for rehabilitation. These findings reinforce the idea that preparing prisoners for reintegration through education and digital skills should be a priority in criminal justice reform.

My specific audience for this project includes policymakers, prison reform advocates, and educators. Personally, I have seen people assume that education is easily attainable for incarcerated individuals, but in reality, access remains inconsistent and possibly nonexistent because of a lack of technology and internet access. By raising awareness among these groups, I hope to encourage meaningful discussions and potential policy changes that could bridge this gap.

The purpose of my project is both to inform and persuade. I aimed to inform my audience about the current situation of technological access in the prison system across the United States, using statistics, studies, and personal experiences of prisoners. I also aimed to persuade my audience that expanding digital access to prisoners is beneficial and cost-effective, again through studies and statistics. My goal was to present a well-researched argument that not only highlights the benefits but also dispels misconceptions about providing education to incarcerated individuals.

My project took the form of a scrollable digital article because I wanted to create a purely informative piece but did not want to bore the reader with only text. The visuals updating as the user scrolls were my idea of keeping the user engaged as they read on. I also hoped to create a

parallel with what I was detailing in my project by using technology to inform others about this issue. This interactive approach mirrors the way digital tools can enhance learning experiences, just as they could for incarcerated individuals.

As for the technology that went into making this project, I wrote the script (this file) using Typst, a typesetting language similar to LaTeX. The website uses Next.js, a web development framework. The website itself is hosted on Cloudflare Pages, which allows hosting of static webpages using GitHub, a service useful for file version control. Although the setup was a bit complex, I am satisfied with how it turned out and hope that others enjoy the format in which it is presented. This technical foundation not only made the project functional but also allowed me to experiment with different ways to make research more engaging and accessible.

Below is a formal version of the works cited page in MLA format also:

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