Disclaimer: This paper is a brief analysis of "Prison Official Perceptions of Technology in Prison" by Andrea Mufarreh, Jason Waitkus, and Teresa A Booker. Any differences in interpretations are the responsibility of the author. If any errors are noted please inform the author. For a more comprehensive understanding of this subject, we recommend reading the original paper available in *Punishment & Society.*

Analysis of

Prison Official Perceptions of Technology in Prison

By Andrea Mufarreh, Jason Waitkus, and Teresa A Booker

Analysis by

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Introduction and Background

This quantitative study examines the sociological outcomes of implementing technology, specifically tablets, to inmates and correctional staff within correctional facilities in the United States.

The author acknowledges recent objectives by state and federal legislators to allow tablets into correctional facilities to improve educational opportunities, literacy, mental health, job skills and reduce recidivism rates of the justice-involved. The author employed a quantitative research approach, surveying "70 prison officials from six states" from which to report findings on "their attitudes toward access" (Mufarreh, Waitkus, & Booker, 2022, p. 410).

Results indicate that correctional officials working at facilities with higher access to technology were more partial to believing that access to technology positively impacts inmates.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate globally, and the recidivism rate is 89% within ten years of release (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). Contributors to this phenomenon include the existing gang cultures both within and outside of prisons, addiction, mental health issues, and a lack of social resources for exiting inmates to prevail in a successful transition back into civil Society, including the acquisition of digital skills which have become mandatory in nearly all fields. Trial studies were implemented in response to the Federal First Step Act (FSA) of 2018, landmark legislation to improve outcomes for the justice involved (Office of Justice Programs, 2022). Based on the outcomes of that study, tablets were accepted as safe and valuable when used correctly with restrictions. However, after their distribution, safety protocols were indeed breached, causing many facilities to terminate the use of tablets until further research could ensure safer outcomes. As a result of these safety breaches, prison officials have mixed feelings about using tablets. Since the distribution and implementation of tablets in

early 2021, there have not been any studies that examine their perceived efficacy from a social sciences perspective, and it is this particular issue that the author addresses in her study. Mufarreh et al. discuss several pros and cons of technology and tablet use within prison culture, including the exploitation by telecommunication carriers, but primarily focus their quantitative study work on the perspectives of prison officials on technology use for prisoners within incarceration facilities.

Methodology

Mufarreh surveyed 70 prison officials in leadership positions across 49 U.S. state prisons. Prisons were chosen based on their likelihood of already providing technology to inmates or who had already implemented tablets. Mufarreh consulted with The Institutional Review Board (IRB) in advance of the study.

The survey tool used was SurveyMonkey, an online survey software. Mufarreh surveyed prison officials over four months in 2019. The study used years of experience and technology used as the two primary variables. Prior studies were reviewed for determining assessment variables, including Misis et al. (2013), Tewksbury and Higgins (2006), Jurik (1985), and Lambert et al. (2011), to name a few.

Mufarreh's work primarily focused on two independent variables and two dependent variables. The two independent variables were 1) how long has the official been working in corrections, and 2) is there already access to technology. The two dependent variables were 1) do they have a favorable view of the effect access to technology has on the prisoners, and 2) do they have a favorable view of the effect it has on the prison itself? The outcome was four hypotheses which included "a) H1: Prison officials who have more years of experience working in corrections will be more likely to have positive opinions on access to tablets for imprisoned

people; b) H2: Prison officials who have more years of experience working in corrections will be more likely to have positive opinions on access to tablets for the prisons themselves; c) H3: Prison officials from prisons in which imprisoned people have more access to technology will have a positive opinion on access to tablets for imprisoned people, and d) H4: Prison officials from prisons in which imprisoned people have more access to technology will have a positive opinion on access to tablets for the prisons themselves" (Mufarreh, Waitkus, & Booker, 2022, p.418).

The researchers used a "control variable" for age which was an "ordinal-level variable," and accounted for possible outliers using regression tests for each state except Colorado. A Chi-square test indicated that the main predictors "were significant at $p < .05$ on all four outcomes" (Mufarreh, Waitkus, & Booker, 2022, p. 421). It is important to note that a logistic regression test that added other predictors, such as years of experience working in prisons, had an insignificant effect on the outcome variables, while access to technology positively influenced both outcomes.

Study Findings and Results

The study reveals that prison officials who have access to technology are more likely to have a positive attitude toward technology use by inmates. This result aligns with hypotheses H3 and H4. Additionally, officials in lower-level positions (non-management) with less tenure had a less favorable attitude towards technology use by inmates. Throughout all the variables, there was a positive sign of ($p < .05$) which demonstrated that officials with access to technology were 81 to 95% more likely to have a positive attitude regarding tablet access for inmates across all variables (Mufarreh, Waitkus, & Booker, 2022, p. 423). The researchers found that 1) there is a significant opinion difference based on current access to technology and 2) they also found a

significant effect due to age of the prison official, as well as education and work position, meaning these control variables need to be compensated for.

This study was well written and useful for those working or researching in the areas penology or incarceration systems. However, the study was hampered by a Small sample size, an imbalance in responses from state to state, the official's penal ideologies (punitive vs. rehabilitative), and the types of prisons in the study, i.e., maximum security vs. "low security, as well as the lack of "variance of responses" from prison officials. The researchers advocate for additional studies on the prison population with a larger sample size and broader variables.

Conclusions

While only a pilot study, Mufarreh's cutting-edge research is easily read and provides keen insights into the challenges and benefits of integrating technology training and usage to incarcerated individuals through the use of tablets. The study provides a strong indicator for the use of tablets by inmates within prisons. These results are essential for potentially improving the rehabilitative opportunities for inmates within the prison and reducing recidivism. Tablet technology was only recently introduced into prisons in 2021, and there are very few studies on this subject. Mufarreh's research indicates a positive outlook among prison officials to allow tablet technology to be dispersed to inmates.

The research methods included collecting data through a survey (SurveyMonkey) of prison officials, thereby providing relevant data regarding prison staff's opinions. The data was then analyzed using Chi-Square and regression tests and accounted for multiple control variables, including age, education, and years of experience. Mufarreh recommends, and this author agrees, that future studies should include a Likert scale to increase variances instead of dichotomous responses.

      While small sample sizes hampered this study, the study provides new information in the field of incarceration and technology use by inmates. The findings are encouraging for researchers and scholars who are interested in technology use by inmates within prisons and the researchers advise further studies be conducted on the use of tablets within prisons on the prison population.

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