

INMATE TIME UTILIZATION AND WELL-BEING

by

Mateja Vuk

ABSTRACT

Qualitative studies about prison culture and examinations of correctional recreation and programming offer a comprehensive understanding of prisons' social dynamics, including how individuals spend their free time while incarcerated. Theoretical models and the extant research suggest that involvement in structured and prosocial activities is associated with positive behavioral and emotional outcomes in offenders. However, the majority of studies that provide the empirical evidence for these conclusions do not examine all aspects of time utilization explicitly or do not provide statistical evidence of the strength and significance of the associations. Additionally, many of these investigations are dated.

To address these gaps, this study uses quantitative data to examine the relationship between inmates' subjective perception of using time in prison constructively and objective evaluation of participation in activities and emotional well-being in contemporary correctional institutions in the United States. Specifically, this study aims to determine how inmates experience their time in prison, what activities they engage in, and what motivates their involvement. In addition, this study explores how inmate time use is associated with depression and anxiety using the stress-coping model developed by Richard Lazarus (1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This research was conducted with 503 randomly selected adult male inmates housed in five medium security correctional institutions under the supervision of the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC). Data were collected at a single time-point using self-administered questionnaires. The results show that many inmates are idle and a large portion of time in prison is spent in unstructured leisure activities. Idleness was associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety. However, greater participation in structured activities was not associated with more positive emotional outcomes. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that different activities have different functions of coping with stress and that personal characteristics are associated with the type of coping inmates adopted. Finally, many inmates are concerned with spending their time in activities for self-improvement, however, many still employ passive techniques such as escaping reality in their daily routines. Implications for policy makers and prison administrators are discussed.