

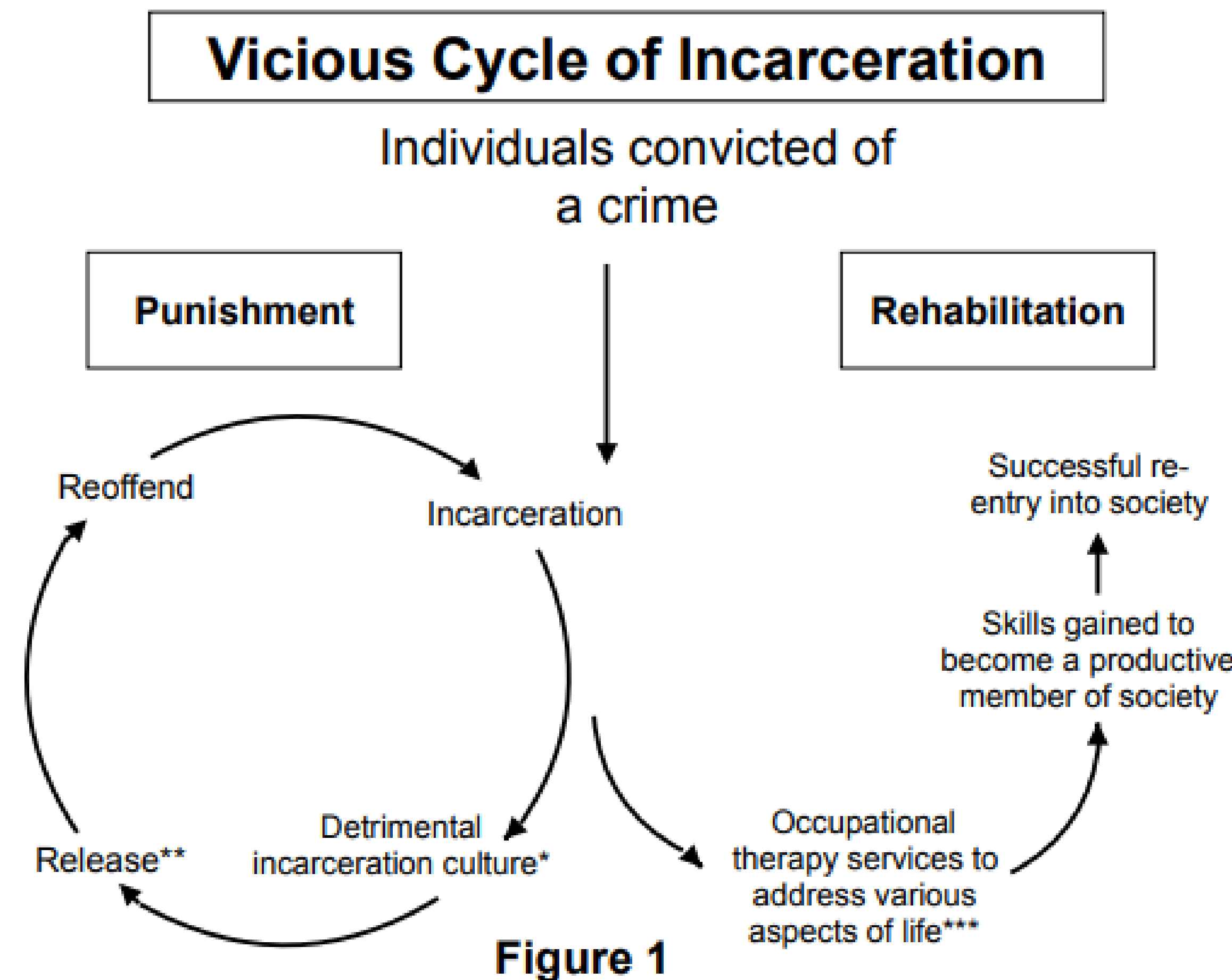


Advocating for the Role of Occupational Therapy in Alabama Correctional Facilities: A Comparative Study

Maggi Welch, OTS; Gavin Jenkins, PhD, OTR/L, ATP
Department of Occupational Therapy | University of Alabama at Birmingham

Introduction

Around 95% of the prison population will eventually be released back into society (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019), but unfortunately, within 5 years, **71% will be rearrested** (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021). **Occupational deprivation** is prevalent among those within Alabama's prison system, primarily due to restrictions on meaningful activity participation. The vicious cycle of incarceration, which has persisted since the abolition of slavery, has only worsened over time, highlighting the necessity for progressive rehabilitative approaches rather than outdated punitive methods (Equal Justice Initiative, 2013). Implementing **occupational therapy (OT) programs** within correctional facilities has yielded **positive outcomes** for inmates, equipping them with **valuable skills** and **positive habits** that facilitate their reintegration into society, resulting in a reduction in recidivism rates (Cain, 2023). Figure 1 demonstrates the vicious cycle of incarceration, with the current punitive practices failing to rehabilitate incarcerated individuals, ultimately perpetuating the high rates of recidivism. With the addition of OT services, **holistic, client-centered rehabilitation approaches** can be implemented to give incarcerated individuals the skills to successfully reintegrate into society. The purpose of this study was to advocate for OT services in Alabama correctional facilities to provide inmates with the tools and support necessary for **successful reintegration** into society to reduce recidivism rates.



*Violence, multiple forms of abuse, solitary confinement, occupational deprivation, witnessing traumatic events, inadequate healthcare, overcrowding, and understaffing
**Released without the necessary transition skills due to the inadequate rehabilitative programs while incarcerated, which can lead to social stigma and isolation, unstable living conditions, job insecurity, and financial challenges, all of which contribute to the high recidivism rates.
***OT services include employment programming, problem-solving skills, stress management/coping skills, interpersonal communication, technology, goal-setting skills, community living skills, financial management, and spiritual exploration.

Methods

An extensive literature review was conducted to determine how OT is implemented in international correctional facilities (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Germany, Australia, the UK), how progressive OT programs are implemented in the US (e.g., Pennsylvania, Missouri, California, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and others), and how Alabama correctional facilities could benefit from similar interventions. For deeper insight into the issue, communication occurred with several key parties, including advocates for criminal justice reform, experienced OTs in correctional settings, and an individual formerly incarcerated for 13 years who successfully reintegrated into society and plays a significant role in advocating for criminal justice reform all over the US.

Results

Four main areas of focus in current OT practices in state correctional facilities outside of Alabama:

1. Education/occupation-based programs to improve re-entry into society
2. Occupational deprivation/occupational justice among inmates
3. Work/employment programs to improve re-entry into society
4. Education and advocacy regarding OT within correctional facilities

Specific programs in correctional facilities that have seen positive outcomes:

1. Little Scandinavia: Chester, PA
2. Justice-Based OT: St. Louis University, MO
3. Amend: San Francisco, CA

Discussion

The implementation of OT programs in correctional facilities throughout the US is an emerging practice, however, these programs are almost **nonexistent in Alabama**. Studies from international prisons highlighted similar beneficial programs, often termed "life skill programs," and their success in reducing recidivism rates by training individuals to become productive members of society. Several states employing occupational therapists and adopting similar rehabilitative initiatives have observed **lower recidivism rates**, enhancing the safety of their society and, therefore, leading to reductions in the costs necessary to house inmates. Occupational therapists are equipped to **address the various barriers inmates face upon re-entry**, making their presence necessary in correctional facilities. Implementing OT services in Alabama's correctional facilities can potentially **reduce the economic costs of incarceration and foster a safer society** (Cain, 2023). This literature review and identification of the lack of program implementation will ultimately result in an advocacy document that will be presented to the Alabama Department of Corrections for the implementation of OT services within correctional facilities.

Discussion continued

Limitations

- Time
- Literature that may have not been included or overlooked
- Not being able to connect with individuals who play a role in the Alabama criminal justice reform

Future Direction

- Present a draft advocacy document to the Alabama Department of Corrections to get feedback to refine and develop a working document
- Continue to reach out to those involved with criminal justice reform in Alabama to advocate for OT services within Alabama correctional facilities
- Continue finding avenues to advocate for OT and the programs that could be implemented in Alabama

Conclusion

Integrating occupational therapy services within Alabama correctional facilities will help incarcerated individuals successfully transition back into society, reducing recidivism rates and stopping the vicious cycle of incarceration. This approach emphasizes the potential for a more rehabilitative approach to incarceration, ultimately benefiting both inmates and society.

References

1. United States Department of Justice. (2019, April 2). *Investigations of Alabama state prisons for men*. <https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/file/1149971/download>
2. Council on Criminal Justice. (2021, September 1). *Recidivism rates: What you need to know*. https://counciloncj.org/recidivism_report/
3. Equal Justice Initiative. (2013, November 1). *Convict leasing*. <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing>
4. Cain, C. (2023). *Occupational justice in the justice system: The impact of occupational therapy on incarcerated Americans* [Honors thesis, Eastern Kentucky University]. Encompass Digital Archive. encompass.eku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2000&context=honors_theses

Acknowledgement & Contact Information

A special thanks to Gavin Jenkins, PhD, OTR/L, ATP; Megan Carpenter, OTD, OTR/L, SCFES; David Garlock; Sarah C. Tucker, PhD, OTR/L; and Jewel Dickson, OTD, MPH, OTR/L, ATP, FAOTA.

Contact information: Maggi Welch, OTS; welchm@uab.edu