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Work by Jail Inmates

ACQUISITIONS

Improvements to work programs in Indian jails are necessary if they are to make a significant contribution to correctional objectives and to society.

By M. Z. Khan

Introduction

Modern correctional institutions offer a variety of work programs as well as counseling and educational programs, seeking to individualize correctional impact and revive the inmates' sense of self-worth. The modern correctional institution in India purports to pursue these rehabilitation objectives, using work in conjunction with other programs to reform offenders.

This study examines work programs in an Indian jail and investigates whether they are purposive and inmate-oriented, and have a positive rehabilitative impact on the inmates. The study describes the work programs and their efforts and explores the staff's orientation to correctional objectives and the inmates' disposition toward the work programs to which they are assigned.

Study site and methodology

Interview data were gathered from inmates and correctional staff in the District Jail, Sagar,* in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

The study site, in the center of the subcontinent, is a medium-sized facility in a rural area. Inhabitants of the area are mostly poor, illiterate, and of lower castes. The inmate population reflects this makeup. The jail is a small, walled institution with some arable land for vegetable gardening and agriculture. The jail has 11 wards and a few solitary confinement cells for an inmate population fluctuating between 150 and 500 prisoners watched over by 60 to 80 wardens. The jail tends to be overcrowded. Making up the gap in staff numbers are

custodial inmates assigned to supervisory duties over other inmates.

The jail has treatment, custodial, and administrative staff. The superintendent is at the apex of the organization, and an assistant jailer is responsible for day-to-day administration. Custodial staff, or wardens, supervise the prisoners and the jail's functioning.

Primary data were collected mainly through structured interviews with 201 inmates and 62 staff members. Inmates were queried about demographic and personal aspects, their offense, their work assignments, subcultural aspects of the jail, their perception of the staff's role, and their views of different correctional programs, including the work programs. Staff interviews involved a different set of questions; responses detailed their perception of their professional success, interaction with the inmates, the place of convict officers (inmates given some supervisory responsibility over other inmates), and the significance of work programs. They also responded to inquiries about their personal and educational background.

Data analysis involved editing to remove inconsistencies, as well as classification, tabulation, and computation, based on the single classification principle. A code book incorporated simple and a few composite variables. Attempts were made to standardize data collection through definition of concepts, code specification, and practice cross-checking.

The interview data allow development of profiles of three major elements of work programs: the inmates, the correctional staff, and the types of work and job skills taught.

Jail inmates

The average prisoner is a young male Hindu, belonging to a lower caste, who is from a large, intact family

Work By Jail Inmates (NCJ 86842), 1982. (Department of Criminology and Forensic Science. University of Saugar, Sagar, India)

* All spellings are shown as in original text. (Ed. note)

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engaged in agriculture. He is illiterate or minimally educated and he is physically fit but possibly addicted to drugs. It is likely that the inmate has committed murder or assault as a part of a group and been imprisoned for more than 5 years.

Jail personnel

The typical jail officer is a male Hindu or Brahmin. He is middle-aged and married, and he has about an 8th-grade education. He has had little job training, although he has been in the jail service for about 16 years. He engages mostly in custodial duties, and while he may discuss professional problems with colleagues, he never discusses them with supervisors.

The officer is not likely to have received any promotions and is likely to express little job satisfaction. However, he is not able to translate this dissatisfaction into ideas or practice.

Work programs

The range of vocational trades available to the inmates is small. Most of the inmate labor is devoted to maintaining the jail and its functions. A major part of this maintenance work is kitchen work, where inmates spend hours in front of hot open hearths. Large aluminum pots are used for preparing gravy, and large tawas, outsized iron-plates, for baking chapattis (flat bread). Two or three inmates operate the electrically run flour mill, while 25 or more handle various kitchen chores. Upper-caste Hindus are preferred for the kitchen work, and kitchen hands are seldom rotated to other work or trades.

Other work assignments include carpetmaking, weaving, carpentry-blacksmithy, and farming or gardening.

Carpetmaking is carried out in a one-room shed having one handloom. About 40 inmates work on a carpet in several shifts. Using cotton yarn, they produce carpets, durri rugs, and settees.

Weaving provides work to a smaller number of inmates. A weaving room houses the loom, warping bay, spindle-wheel, a large tub for dyeing yarn, and a sewing machine. Weavers produce niwar (jute ropes used in beds), towels, bed sheets, and coarse cloth, filling orders placed by commercial concerns. Products are also sold through the open market or supplied to the government. Orders are heavy, and the inmates, struggling to keep up, do not take time to rest and eat lunch in their barracks, but eat in shifts while the loom remains in motion.

Carpentry and blacksmithing are taught by a trained instructor, and about 25 inmates on an average day are assigned to tasks, all manual, that result in production of chairs, tables, cots, stools, and other wooden furniture.

The remaining work option is gardening or agriculture. This is carried out without formal instruction in the few acres of arable land behind the jail building.

Despite the predominantly rural nature of the inmate population, the jail does not place priority on agricultural work. About a dozen inmates work on the land, except during sowing and harvesting seasons, when a few more hands are added.

Whatever agricultural skills the inmates possess on their entry into the institution are those that are used for farming. Bullocks and a few old-style plows are used. Crop irrigation depends on monsoons and dug-wells. Seed and fertilizer are procured from the local Agricultural Department. Vegetables, the main crop, are grown for consumption by other inmates, and a few millets and grains are also grown.

The general picture then, is a minimally educated inmate with few job skills being assigned to work programs and supervised by a slightly better educated warden who is not, in most cases, a trained instructor. In fact, little instruction takes place, and the nature of the program appears largely custodial. The work programs themselves focus on skills that are not necessarily marketable outside the institution, and the equipment tends to be outdated. Mechanization and general working conditions are given insufficient attention. Only the agriculture program appears to have relevance to work outside the institution, but it is carried out without instruction and involves a small proportion of the inmates.

Against this already bleak backdrop, we will look at several factors that influence the efficacy of work programs in achieving rehabilitative goals:

- Procedures and strategies for inmate classification and work assignments;
- Inmate perception of work programs;
- Staff perception of the purpose of work programs;
- Emphasis given work programs as indicated by procedure, organizational priority, and budget.

Inmate classification and work assignment

Following an entry interview, a new inmate may put in some days with the "Broomstick Command" unit, completing tedious and often exhausting maintenance chores. After a few weeks, depending upon the jail's manpower requirements, the prisoner may be assigned to a regular work unit. Assignment to a vocational trade (carpetmaking, agriculture, carpentry-blacksmithing, or weaving) is usually reserved for long-term prisoners. Assignment to kitchen chores is made to upper-caste Hindus. Likewise, for various inmate services (such as laundering, barbering, etc.), assignment is made to occupational caste groups usually performing these types of jobs outside the jail. Considerations like age and education of inmates rarely factor into the work-assignment decision, nor does prior experience or occupation. Only 16 percent of the inmates interviewed had been given work that somewhat corresponded with work they had done outside the jail.

Work distribution. The distribution of inmates to work programs hints at the priority accorded by the institution to various work units and trades. About 45 percent of the inmates are assigned to the vocational trades, 24 percent to inmate services, and 19 percent to the maintenance unit. Convict officers make up about 11 percent of the total inmate distribution.

Within the vocational trades, about 45 percent of inmates are assigned to durri and carpetmaking, 26 percent to carpentry, and 57 percent to kitchen work. The number of inmates assigned to agriculture is small, as is the number assigned to weaving.

Work program relationship to the outside. Job possibilities in this rural area indicate that the most marketable skill would be agriculture, while furniture-making, a skill important in an urban environment, has less demand in a rural environment. An inmate trained in carpetmaking and weaving could seldom hope to start his own business, since the supply of raw material, capital investment, and distribution of the finished product would probably be beyond his capacity. A salaried job in these skills is unlikely in this rural area.

Thus the emphasis on vocational trades does not correspond with the market demands outside the jail, and it is questionable whether participation in the work programs gives the ex-inmate any advantage in the marketplace that he did not have before entering prison.

Work assignment. Do the work assignments given, since they do not correlate with market demand outside the prison and do not take into consideration the inmates' previous experience and education, correspond to the inmates' personal attributes or desires?

Analysis shows a mild correlation with inmate age. Most inmates aged 21 to 25 are engaged in either inmate service or jail maintenance, and 55 percent of the inmates in vocational trades are in the age group of 26 to 30. Thirty-seven percent of inmates assigned to the vocational trades are convicted of murder; many are assigned to carpetmaking and weaving. Carpentry is a likely assignment for inmates convicted of robbery and dacoity (armed robbery committed by a gang). Agriculture, on the other hand, appears to be assigned most often to short-termers with less severe offenses.

Overall, the data show that there is little systematic work assignment. Two vocational instructors expressed the opinion that manpower requirements were the main determinants of job assignments. This would indicate that work assignment and the work programs themselves are not inmate oriented or purposive. They are an extension of the custodial nature and the operations of the prison. However, inmate preference could be a factor. Inmates' responses to the questionnaire negate this. Barely 6 percent of the inmates had a hand in choosing their work. In vocational trades, 96 percent of participants were assigned and almost all in kitchen work were assigned. No one assigned to maintenance or as convict officer chose the work. However, many of the inmates assigned to the office and supply room were there by preference.

Although a majority of inmates deny that authorities are partial in assigning a job, a sizable proportion of them think otherwise.

Inmate perception of work programs

The type of work and its mode of assignment are likely to determine the inmates' like or dislike for their tasks. The liking for a job would increase to the extent it agrees with the aspirations, interests, and capabilities of the inmate. The study data show that most of the inmates like their present work assignments, but a sizable portion (27 percent) dislike them. Liking for work, indeed, shows significant correlation with the mode of assignment. All inmates who chose their work liked it; all who disliked their work had it arbitrarily assigned.

More than half of the inmates engaged in vocational trades dislike their work; long termers are the most vehement. However, this varies from trade to trade. While nearly all of the inmates engaged in carpetmaking dislike their work, nearly all of the inmates in carpentry and farming like theirs. In the other trades, the amount of like or dislike is not so all-embracing.

What is it that the inmates like in their work? The most attractive feature is the "easiness" of the assignment. Next is utility, followed by instruction, skill attainment, and work incentives (praise and an extra day of remission).

Inmates were more verbal about the negative aspects of work. They complained that it was unsatisfying, economically unrewarding, and unuseful, and that the physical conditions of the workplace and the tools and materials were unsatisfactory. It is significant that most inmates assigned to vocational trades perceived their work to be unsatisfactory and lacking utility.

Job assignments are sometimes changed (in this sample about 27 percent had changed at least once). However, many did not understand why changes were made. Others regarded the change as a disciplinary measure or felt that the manpower requirements merely had shifted. Few inmates wanted a shift in work assignment, however, and the longer the inmate was in the institution, the less appealing a shift in work assignments was. Those who did want to change wanted to shift to agriculture, durrimaking, or carpentry.

Inmates preferred different jobs because they were "more in line with what the inmate was doing before imprisonment," useful, provided a "chance to learn a skill," and because they were "easy."

Staff perception of work programs

Nearly all of the correctional staff recognized a rehabilitative function for the work programs. Some were even emphatic about it. However, their personal role-perception as agents of rehabilitative change appears distorted. Opinion is divided on the necessity of teamwork, full participation in correctional programs, and feelings about the ability to change inmates' behavior.

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Most officials felt that the impact of work programs on the general behavior of inmates was negligible. When asked if inmates used the time in jail to improve their ideas and conduct, the majority of staff replied that "some of them do," while the next largest group responded "none of them do." When asked if they thought that inmates worked hard regardless of remission or reward, 88 percent responded that "some" or "none" of them do. Only 5 percent of the officers felt that inmates cooperated toward their rehabilitation.

Better educated officers feel more strongly about the rehabilitative value of work programs. A still stronger correlation is seen when this dimension is examined in relation to correctional orientation of the officers. Officers who give priority to their correctional role see much rehabilitative value in work programs.

The priority given work programs in procedures, organization, and budget

Custodial procedures in the jail appear adequate and effective. Treatment aspects do not seem to be so thoroughly addressed. The classification of inmates exists more on paper than in reality. There is little training or instruction in the work program, and no classroom instruction at all. Whatever technical skills inmates pick up are through the process of maturation, beginning with manual chores, handling rudimentary tasks, and eventually moving up to more complicated tasks.

No wage schemes are in place, and inmates work only for additional "good time" or remission, appointment as a convict officer, or praise and appreciation. They also work to avoid punishment--solitary confinement, cancellation of remission, link and fetter, and oral reprimands. Punishment, however, is used frequently as a negative incentive to spur inmates to greater work efforts.

Little concerted attention is paid to the establishment of viable outlets for the products of inmate labor. Properly organized distribution and sale would likely generate profits and surplus that would, in turn, give impetus to enhanced investment in these activities and a realistic incentive scheme for inmates. Most of the goods produced are either consumed in the prison itself, supplied to government departments, or bulk-auctioned to be retailed by traders.

In addition, little money is devoted to work programs. The maintenance unit has equipment amounting to brooms, baskets, and a few wheelbarrows; tailors and barbers have basic equipment only. The kitchen is tradi-

tional. Other vocational programs have outmoded equipment, none of it mechanized, while some modernization has taken place in the district. Inmates in the agriculture program use plows and bullocks, but farmers in the district now have tractors. Carpenters outside the institution are using electrical tools, and power looms are common not only in clothmaking but also in carpetmaking and durrimaking. This equipment is not available to the prisoners and there is no apparent plan to acquire it.

Conclusion

Generally, the results of the study were not favorable. Illiterate or barely educated inmates are arbitrarily assigned to work programs supervised by untrained custodial officers with no mandate to instruct. Equipment is outmoded, and procedures and organization are weak in terms of supporting a rehabilitation program. Skills being acquired by inmates bear little relevance to what is marketable outside the institution. (In fact, there appears to be no followup or even any opinion by correctional officers on whether ex-inmates are able to find work or function socially after release.) Equipment is so outmoded that skills that might be marketable, such as agriculture, are not learned using methods commonly applied in the area.

Implications

Work programs, as part of the larger correctional services programs, are important to correctional objectives everywhere, but they are crucial to a developing country like India. Augmentation and intensification of work programs in jails would be in keeping with the national effort to strengthen India's agricultural and industrial base. The present study shows work by jail inmates is not given adequate attention.

Perhaps the inmate has been thought of as unteachable. But surely not all of them are incapable of acquiring some skills. Not all vocational trades make strong demands on educational level.

In almost all the district headquarters in town, industrial-technical institutes have been organized to develop manpower resources through short-term vocational training programs. Perhaps some of the resources could be diverted to jail work programs. Vocational training for inmates needs to be given a chance, in terms of organizational priority, resources, and infrastructure. They have a large potential for making a positive and significant contribution to correctional objectives and to nation building.