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Ithaka S+R provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, demographic, and technological change.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.
Session Goals

1. Provide context on mass incarceration and why the prison is a site of digital exclusion.

2. Introduce the challenges and complexities of conducting research in the prison space.

3. Dig in to one major intervention, Higher Education in Prisons (HEP), and explore its intersections with digital inclusion research.
Understanding the Scale of the Issue

How many people are locked up in the United States?

The U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation, at the staggering rate of 565 per 100,000 residents. But to end mass incarceration, we must first consider where and why 1.9 million people are confined nationwide.

Sources and data notes: www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html
Understanding the Scale of the Issue

Mass incarceration directly impacts millions of people
But just how many, and in what ways?

- Incarcerated today in prison or jail: 1.9 million
- Formerly incarcerated in state or federal prison: 4.9 million
- Ever convicted of a felony: 19 million
- Have a criminal record: 79 million or more
- Have an immediate family member who has ever been to prison or jail: 113 million adults

Most face "collateral consequences" even after their sentence ends such as voting, housing, education, employment, and other restrictions.

Understanding the Scale of the Issue

Most people in prison are poor, and the poorest are women and people of color

Median annual pre-incarceration incomes for people in state prisons ages 27-42, compared to incomes of same-age non-incarcerated people, by race/ethnicity and gender (in 2014 dollars)

Compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative. For detailed data notes, see www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/income.html
The Prison as a Site of Digital Exclusion

- There is typically no access to the internet within prisons. What access exists is limited and tightly controlled.
- The two main technology providers are for-profit, with business models that have been called exploitative of people who are incarcerated and their families.
- Many tech solutions are OK’d by DOCs* because they promise they can surveil all activity and communication.
- Access to digital resources is often sporadic and unpredictable, often due to policy changes and faulty hardware.

*DOC: Department of Corrections
The Prison as a Site of Digital Exclusion

What this Means

- Technology in the prison space can be alienating due to exploitative costs and surveillance.
- What technology exists is typically designed for the prison, and so may function differently than technology in the free world.
- Limited access, long sentences, and preexisting digital exclusion lead to a significant lack of information and digital literacy.
The Prison as a Site of Digital Exclusion
Impact on People

Basic Proficiencies

Students express the need to leave prison with digital skills. They see these skills as vital to their success, be it to get a job, continue their education, or navigate 21st Century society generally.

Fear of Embarrassment/Being ‘outed’

Students express the concern that their inability to use technology could out their status as being formerly incarcerated.

Reduced Autonomy

Students noted that their lack of digital literacy reduced their autonomy, making them more reliant on others to perform basic tasks.
“The biggest challenge now is computers... I didn’t even realize what I didn’t know.”

-Formerly incarcerated student reflecting on their reentry experience
Conducting Research in the Prison Space
Conducting Research in the Prison Space

Stakeholders

- Prioritize independence, transparency, and rigor.
- Research agenda may not align with DOC interests.
- Come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds.

- Prioritizes security and control.
- Works in a punishment/rehabilitation framework.
- Complex hierarchy and bureaucracy.
- Every state and facility can be different.

- Are the experts of their own experience.
- Have special protections under the Common Rule.
- Have limited agency. Gaining consent and providing research incentives must be carefully considered.
Conducting Research in the Prison Space

**DOC Review**

- DOC review processes can be opaque and lengthy. It is not always clear who the decision makers are.

- Many directives require outputs to be reviewed by DOC prior to publication.

- Some directives require that the research “has some value to the Department” meaning that research must be aligned with DOC interests and priorities.

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**From the Texas Department of Criminal Justice**

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**The External Research Process**

**What is the TDCJ External Research process?**

The TDCJ External Research process is outlined below. This occurs in three phases: 1) the initial review phase, 2) active project phase, 3) closure phase.

**Initial Review Phase**

This phase may take up to 180 days.

- Submit completed research packet with necessary components
- Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducts a background investigation of PI and Co-PIs
- Research and Development prepares research packet and internal documentation
- Office of General Counsel (OGC) reviews project
- Designated Division Directors review project
- Deputy Executive Director reviews project
- Project is approved or denied

**Active Project Phase**

This phase is the entire length of time your data is being collected and used for publication or analysis.

- Collect/receive data
- Complete Progress Reports (ERF 22.11)
  - Initial progress report at 3 months
  - Subsequent reports every 6 months
- Complete and present technical report(s) on project findings
- A minimum of one technical report is required for each project
- Research and Development will aid in the coordination of your technical report presentation with TDCJ personnel if needed
- Publish or present your findings
  - Provide outward-facing materials (manuscript drafts, presentations, posters, etc.) to Research and Development at least 30 days prior to submission/presentation for review
- Submit External Research Incident Reports (ERF 22.12) when applicable
  - Documents adverse events that occur during the course of an external research project

**Closure Phase**

This phase occurs when data collection/reception has ended and all publications as well as presentations of project data have been completed.

- Submit External Research Closure Request (ERF 22.12)
  - Will serve as the final documentation of the technical reports, publications, presentations, and other materials your project has generated
- Designated Division Directors review project closure
- Research and Development provides Project Closure Memorandum
“Politicians don’t know what to do about crime, but they’re going to do something, even if it’s wrong.”

Higher Education in Prisons & Digital Inclusion
Field was decimated during the tough on crime era, though has resurged over the past decade through the support of philanthropy and the restoration of Pell Grants.

Programs exist at the will of the DOC.

Many college programs are completely analog (e.g. all assignments and papers are handwritten).

The lack of technology holds serious implications for program quality, equity, and sustainability.
Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs
A Report on Survey Findings
Eve Polkornowski

Study Overview

- A first of its kind national survey of HEP programs dedicated to their technology infrastructure.
- Provide the field with comparative information with which to benchmark implementations.
- Covered 4 major focus areas: Devices, LMS/Software, Network Access, and Future Plans.
- Supplemented by a series of follow up interviews to capture greater texture and nuance.

Made possible through the support of
Key Findings

- Majority of HEP instruction still occurring entirely in person.
- 24% of respondents say their students have zero tech access.
- Optimistic outlooks: 67% of respondents believe they will expand tech access within the next 2 years.
- There is less optimism about expanding internet access.
Program Responses by State

Programs operating in 36 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey.
Technological Devices

- Desktop Computers: 52% of respondents have access
- Laptops: 31% of respondents have access
- Tablets: 26% of respondents have access

% of Respondents with Tech Access
Sufficient Access to Complete Coursework

- Tablets:
  - I'm not sure/don't know: 25
  - No: 46
  - Yes: 29

- Laptops:
  - I'm not sure/don't know: 17
  - No: 34
  - Yes: 48

- Desktop Computers:
  - I'm not sure/don't know: 8
  - No: 31
  - Yes: 60
Future Plans: Implementing or Expanding Access to Priority Technology

- Within 0-1 years: 27%
- Within 2 years: 40%
- Within 5 years: 9%
- More than 5 years: 8%
- Other: 17%

% of Respondents
Internet Access

The majority of students do not have any internet access.
Future Plans: Implementing or Expanding Internet Access

- N/A-currently satisfied with internet access: 3
- more than 5 years in the future: 22
- within 5 years: 18
- within 2 years: 26
- 0-1 years: 15

% of Respondents
Setting a Research Agenda

4 Focal Points for HEP

1. Instructional engagement and delivery.

2. Information and digital literacy.

3. Disability, accessibility, and accommodation.

4. Digital skills in reentry and employment.
Setting a Research Agenda
For HEP & Digital Inclusion Research

- Need to move from a presence/absence framework to one that studies the quality of access and use.

- Develop a holistic framework that investigates digital inclusion before, during, and after incarceration.

- Connect research on the carceral context to the broader field of digital inclusion research.

“Penal institutions tend to be a kind of catch basin for a myriad of human problems not resolved elsewhere.”

Thank you

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