**Topic Proposal Example**

With the growth of the prison system comes the growth of programs intended to reduce recidivism and aid reentry. Work release programs do just that by allowing individuals close to release to work in their community during the day and return to supervision at night. As with any program, it is important that research supports its existence and expansion. From the beginning, research on the effectiveness of work release programs has yielded mixed results. Some studies show that work release programs decrease taxpayer expenses because inmates are able to use their wages to pay for their cost of living and they can contribute to their family (Cooper, 1970; Turner & Petersilia, 1996). Others argue that no cost savings exists if these individuals are sent back to prison (Waldo & Chiricos, 1977). Some studies show that these programs decrease recidivism by providing returning citizens with employment and/or job related skills they may not have had before. It also provides them with savings so they have some money to live on when they return to the community (Katz & Decker, 1982). Results from these kinds of studies are inconclusive, despite advances in methods.

In a perfect world, participation in work release programs should benefit returning citizens and the community in some way. This could be by saving money, reducing recidivism or increasing employability of individuals who have been incarcerated. One of the main factors contributing to recidivism is the struggle to find work once released. Many individuals who enter prison have little education and job skills to begin with, then the addition of a criminal record makes finding employment even more difficult. If these individuals are provided with a legitimate income, taught job skills and guaranteed employment, they may be less likely to return to their old habits upon release. Work release programs should save taxpayers money because these inmates are able to use their wages to pay for room and board and they also pay taxes on their income. It should also save taxpayers money if it decreases recidivism, therefore keeping these individuals out of prison.

When work release programs started to gain popularity in the 1950’s, the main incentive for their existence was the economic benefit (Waldo & Chiricos, 1977). Many of the first studies implemented focused solely on this and used very simple methodology. One of the early studies simply sent out a questionnaire to employers and employees and recorded their responses. With this study, many individuals selected into work release were individuals who were likely to be successful upon release anyway. This is often done when researchers or policy makers want a program to appear successful whether it actually is or not. The results from this study showed that both parties benefited from work release and the program appeared to be doing its job of providing post-release employment (Cooper, 1970). Several of the later studies focused on the relationship between work release and recidivism, but ignored the impact of post-release employment (Turner & Petersilia, 1996; Waldo & Chiricos, 1977). If having a job is what is supposed to decrease recidivism then this is an important variable to look into.

The more recent studies have seemed to increase in rigor. This research has moved from simple questionnaires and cost analysis to true experimental designs including many controls and clearly operationalizing variables such as recidivism and success, but it appears that as studies increase in rigor, they decrease in positivity (Katz & Decker, 1982). Many of the recent studies show that work-release does not in fact reduce recidivism and when recidivism is not reduced, money is not saved. Even when controlling for variables like mental illness and substance abuse that may make reentry more difficult, work-release still comes up short (Bales et al., 2016). A great deal of work-release studies focus on one specific state and this may make it difficult to generalize results. The way programs run differs from facility to facility, but even more from state to state and it is unclear whether programs in some areas are working better than others. This could be a good direction for future research as it is important to know what is working and what is not. If there is a program in one state that shows great reductions in recidivism, other states may want to implement that. On the other hand, if certain programs are failing, it is important to know what is being done wrong.

**References**

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