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SPEAKERS

Ajima Olaghere, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez

- J** Jose Sanchez 00:00
Hi, everyone. So what you're about to hear are two clarifying questions that we asked Ajima at the end of the episode, but we thought that they'd be of more use moving them to the front of the episode; to the beginning of the episode. And once you're through with those, then we'll get into the full episode. Enjoy.
- J** Jose Sanchez 00:11
We have two quick questions for you that we had wanted to ask earlier. But they kind of got like slipped slipped through the cracks. So we want to ask them now and then just sort of magically put them.
- A** Ajima Olaghere 00:17
That's perfect.
- J** Jose Sanchez 00:17
And so the first one was, and so and I think, because most people, at least for me, so when I was an undergrad, like, I would sort of look at my financial aid, and it's like, Pell Grant, and like, like, all that really meant to me was, okay, I'm getting money. What exactly is

that?

A

Ajima Olaghere 00:29

It's a grant, it literally is. So it's free money unlike student loans, where there's interest rates attached to it, you got to pay it back and, I haven't received the Pell Grant in years. I think I received it once like, oh, great! Then it never happened again. But the Pell Grant is, I think it's calculated based on your taxes or your family's household taxes. And I forget if there's a cap or how much you can receive, but I assume it's sufficient enough to pay for tuition, at least to make a good dent in it. But then again, the cost of tuition these days, but hopefully it's adjusted for that. But it's free money from the federal government, essentially, to pay for to enroll in college to pay for tuition. Or Yeah, I think I don't know if it's locked to tuition, or if it's just for just, if you're enrolled, here's money to pursue education.

J

Jose Sanchez 01:00

What was our other question, Jenn?



Jenn Tostlebe 01:01

So you mentioned the First Step Act, can you just describe quickly what the First Step Act is?

A

Ajima Olaghere 01:05

So the First Step Act, and forgive me, I'm recalling it was it, so it was kind of reform bill that undid a lot of things like, it's kind of think of just sort of a reentry bill, the first sort of reentry bill we had since I think, George Bush, the second, the junior, and so what it did was remove things like, for example, women who are pregnant and shackled. That's no longer a thing, right? The First Step Act actually, also, I'm trying to think it did things like improve conditions of confinement. So like de-escalation training, actually takes into account the different ways in which women experience incarceration, I mentioned like so the not being shackled, the feminine hygiene projects, things like that. And I think there's more something else significant around sentencing that I'm trying to recall. But, ah! It also released a lot of people who had racked up goodtime credits, and I think were low level or non violent sentences. And so it enabled a lot of people to be released. And I think also what I'm forgetting some major sentencing aspect of it, I really am. I'm, I'm trying to remember, what was a huge piece of this.



Ajima Olaghere 02:34

So one huge thing in terms of sentencing, there's this thing called the safety valve, particularly at the federal level, so for federal, people who receive federal sentences. Typically, the safety valve sort of like a mitigating factor, you could apply to a sentence. So the First Step Act expanded basically eligibility for the safety valve where a judge can impose a lower sentence despite being subject to imposing a mandatory minimum. So the safety valves are sort of meant to sort of like, it's kind of, it's kind of like a I'm supposed to impose this mandatory minimum, but you meet these other criteria that allows me to go around that. So prison conditions was another thing. Let's see, Oh, did it actually, that was the other huge thing. So if you recall the sentencing disparity between powder and crack cocaine cocaine, it's originally 100/1. You reduced it. So that reduction, I forget what it is now.



Jose Sanchez 05:15

I think it's 18/1.



Ajima Olaghere 05:17

Yeah, so that reduction when, when that was passed, it wasn't retroactive. So you had a lot of people that are incarcerated on the original disparity, the First Step Act made that retroactive...And so that was like I and the other things are related to like to fixing good time, the conditions of confinement for women, in terms of access for feminine hygiene products and pregnant women who are detained, not being handcuffed in the process of like, labor. Yeah, so those are the major sort of things that it did. And that was instrumental. We saw a lot of people get released based on that.



Jenn Tostlebe 06:06

Yeah, I was like thinking after when we were going on to new topics. I was like, we need to go back and ask those.



Ajima Olaghere 06:12

No, I'm glad you did, because it's kind of so easy to forget. But like, like I said, that's probably the I think, the most meaningful legislation that has passed since in terms of reentry since the Second Chance Act. That because because between George Bush's presidency, so during the Obama years, there was a lot of bipartisan support and still is for criminal justice reform, but we didn't see any law come out. So that was sort of like a

nice, finally something.



Jenn Tostlebe 06:48

Alright. [GOING INTO FULL EPISODE HERE]



Jose Sanchez 07:04

Hi, everyone. Welcome back. My name is Jose Sanchez.



Jenn Tostlebe 07:07

And I'm Jenn Tostlebe.



Jose Sanchez 07:08

And we are co-hosts of The Criminology Academy, where we are criminally academic.



Jenn Tostlebe 07:13

In this episode, we will be speaking with Professor Ajima Olaghere about incarcerated populations and correctional education.



Jose Sanchez 07:21

Ajima Olaghere is an Assistant Professor at Temple University's Department of Criminal Justice, where her research advances our understanding of the interrelated nature of communities, place, policing and reentry. Dr. Olaghere approaches Criminology with a strong belief that the act of research – that is, the way researchers conduct themselves and their studies – is critical to producing meaningful impact on policies, practices and affected communities. This belief has driven her to publish quantitative studies on juvenile drug treatment and youth diversion, alongside qualitative and mixed-method studies on street-level drug transactions. Recently, she has been laser-focused on a persistent gap in her field of Criminology – A lack of intentional, meaningful and upfront community engagement in research. Thank you so much for joining us today, Ajima.



Ajima Olaghere 08:16

Thank you for having me. And for the introduction, it's a great reading my bio.



Jenn Tostlebe 08:24

So, kind of a brief overview of where we're going with this episode. First, we're gonna start with some broad questions per usual kind of surrounding the areas of incarcerated populations and educational experiences and opportunities within correctional facilities. And then we'll move into a paper authored by Ajima, as well as some of her co-authors on learning opportunities while incarcerated. And then last but not least, we'll move into another project that Ajima is working on on legitimacy within corrections. So Jose, why don't you get us started?



Jose Sanchez 09:01

Sure thing. So the first thing that we want to talk to you about is like this, these broad questions about education with incarcerated populations, and sort of like the opportunities that they might have, or the lack of, right? And so our first question for you is, what is sort of like the prevalence of high school diplomas or GEDs among incarcerated population?



Ajima Olaghere 09:30

Yeah, great question when you think about the context of what we're gonna be discussing. The data I'm going to cite, it's pretty old from 2013, comes from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. So we need another sort of iteration of this. And I think the First Step Act might be the start of that. I think there's a mandate to collect some statistics about correctional populations or at least I saw that, but just under 30%, we think about the federal level, the state level, and then of course, that's going to vary between the federal level the state level, but in terms of like the high school diploma which is treated separately from the GED, it's just about 27%. At the state level, I think you see more GEDs that are closer to 30%. Around 28% versus high school diploma that's more like close to a fifth. So 22%. So there is a very sort of small, small, small proportion of people who are currently incarcerated that have completed formal education, right, or secondary education.



Jose Sanchez 10:25

Along similar lines, beside imagine, since since it doesn't seem very prevalent for them to have high school diplomas or GEDs, I'm gonna take a shot in the dark and say that post secondary education isn't very prevalent with them either?



Ajima Olaghere 10:43

Yep. Yyou hit the mark, despite taking that shot in the dark. Yeah, exactly. We know a prerequisite for post secondary education programs is having a GED or high school diploma. And so it's actually much lower than 30%. I think at the federal level, it's probably hovering around 23%. At the state, you're looking at much less than 20%. And we saw, particularly in 2013, when these metrics were produced, this drastic decrease in obtaining or being enrolled is a direct result of the 1994 crime bill, which banned incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell grants to pursue their college education while incarcerated. So that you can imagine or we can hypothesize that probably had an effect on people's motivation or incentive to complete their GED if they hadn't had a high school diploma while they're incarcerated.



Jenn Tostlebe 11:33

Do you know off the top of your head, like what that average level of highest level of education is? I know, in one of the studies that I work on the data a lot, it's like 10th 11th grade is like the mean within the sample. Is that and that's just within Texas. Is that kind of representative of the national statistics?



Ajima Olaghere 11:54

Unfortunately. So we looked at, the dataset that we use did not, I think it did. It sounds consistent. I'm not sure. But in terms of average, yeah, I'd be surprised if just given the prevalence if it was anything higher than that. And it's sad too. And there's, there's a lot of opportunity to there, which kind of goes into sort of the impetus for the article that we wrote.



Jenn Tostlebe 12:22

So our next question is more on disparities. So we know that there are disparities in education within the community at large, especially for communities that tend to be more disadvantaged, or from oppressed communities. Do we see these same disparities in education for those who are incarcerated? Or is there this equity, this equality in education within corrections?



Ajima Olaghere 12:47

It's exactly as you said. There is a disparity. And I think that's one of the sort of the interesting things that we found in one of the models that we ran in terms of the weight,

the very imperfect way in which we were actually trying to capture structural disadvantage in terms of language and race and ethnicity, which I do not advocate. But the limitation of the data itself, we saw that that tended to be associated with a decrease in literacy and numeracy scores. And we said that we sort of hypothesized that's a direct result of people who are being incarcerated are coming from communities and contexts where in terms of education in terms of resources, there are greatest advantages, so that's directly translated into a facility, which goes into—we have an equity issue, where if there are educational programs being provided institutions that are meant to prepare people to rehabilitate or provide them, what we say is a competitive chance upon release, there's a whole sort of segment of people that are not even able to even begin to go through that process, because they're coming in from sort of a different place. And so it requires a conversation about equity. What do we need to do to get people to that same level in order to be able to take advantage of some of these post secondary and more formal programs that do have eligibility criteria attached to them?

J

Jose Sanchez 14:00

And within the correctional institutions talking about, you know, these programs, what types of formal educational programs are offered in correction institutions?

A


Ajima Olaghere 14:12


So you have your your basic, you know, required one, so, obviously, the GED program, right? And then there's adult basic education, there's vocational programs, there's programs that are sometimes tied to, you know, your specific offense category that have to do for the sake of parole sometimes. Sometimes there's just nonprofit programs where you're not going to see this consistently across the different states or the federal system. But at a baseline level, we can expect that our correctional institutions have a high school or rather a GED program available. And then I think vocational programs as well and technical things. Anything beyond that, these sort of more sort of post secondary education, for example, or see like coding something much more sort of unique and skill driven or knowledge based, it's going to it's going to vary. It really depends on resources, and the institution, and just, you know, is that something that's gonna be welcomed within the facility?


J

Jose Sanchez 15:07

Right? And I imagined non-formal or more informal programming will vary even more in institutions?

 Ajima Olaghere 15:17
Yeah.


 Jose Sanchez 15:17
What are some examples of maybe something that's outside of formal education?

 Ajima Olaghere 15:23
Oh, yeah, I'm so glad you asked this question. So I have a couple of women that I keep in touch with who were formerly incarcerated, and learn that in the time that they were there, it was, I think, more so attached to this, like, it's like this prison industry was part of their jobs, let's say that it is. But they learned or became quite skilled in this program called AutoCAD. I don't know if you're familiar with that. But my basic understanding of that, it's basically, it's a very specialized program that you use to sort of do sort of Designing Spaces, or like blueprints or architecture. So it's a very, very sort of useful skill, so much so that you can actually leave and actually compete with someone who has many years of [experience]. You're basically designing some of the Zoom backgrounds that we use, right, in terms of how do you actually place that up? Yeah. So that's it. Yeah, it's fantastic. And sometimes accounting practices as well, right, where you're actually processing and handling, you know, serious financials, documents, paperwork. So those are things that are not necessarily formally tied to sort of like educational endeavors, but are types of programs, right, that you wouldn't see or wouldn't expect to see in every facility, just depending on resources that are there, but also just the philosophy of the institution, in terms of what individuals are gonna be allowed to do and trained to do.



Jenn Tostlebe 16:39

It's like, I can't remember what facility it was in. But I remember hearing about like a chef [culinary] program where you could learn like, you know, more advanced techniques, even then just your typical how to cook a normal meal.


 Ajima Olaghere 16:51
Exactly.





Jenn Tostlebe 16:52

Yeah, actually have like the public come in and do like a restaurant and everything. So

those kinds of things are very, very cool. And they help when people are released, instead of just, you know, your GED, you walk away skill, too.

 Ajima Olaghere 17:06
Mm hmm.


 Jose Sanchez 17:07
Yeah, I remember speaking with someone, and this was a long time ago, I don't think they do it anymore. But the institution he was in, gave them auto shop, right? So they got to work on cars and learn how to repair an engine or transmission, that sort of stuff. But I'm pretty sure they don't do that anymore. Just this was maybe 10 years ago, probably a bit more than that. And, you know, you go through budget cuts, and programming tends to be the first thing that goes with that sort of stuff.

 Ajima Olaghere 17:37
Yeah, that's unfortunate.



Jenn Tostlebe 17:39

Yeah. Alright, so starting to kind of move into the paper that we'll be talking about then. So in the introduction of this paper, you refer to the 2019 expansion to the Second Chance Pell Grant Experimental Initiative. So can you kind of describe this initiative and how it differentially impacts educational opportunities within correctional institutions?

 Ajima Olaghere 18:04
Awesome. Yeah. So that that if you know anything about the Pell Grant, now being widely available, that gives you insight to how when we started working on this paper. But the initiative to backtrack, the history of where we are right now, the initiative essentially was started in Obama's sort of lame duck years, his last year as presidency, then Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, I believe, and I think Loretta Lynch, then former Attorney General were involved in this, but it was an effort to sort of highlight a different existing college education program operating in prison that manage to stay in operation after the 1994 crime bill, largely through private funding and donations, and sometimes through and also the university support. It was an attempt to basically pilot if we can reinstate Pell funding back, right, sort of an incremental approach to what recently happened with the I

think it was the at the end of 2020. Just last year, the Congress, we appropriately the their spending bill, what was tacked on was removing the band and reinstating access to Pell grants for any incarcerated students in this country. And the differential impact associated with that is that we are now expanding access to every state, every institution of higher education, to get back into the business of extending the opportunity to pursue your college degree. And so in some sense, you are allowing more public schools to get involved, public institutions, right, as opposed to private, small, or art schools that probably had the funds in their donor base to actually continue operations.

A

Ajima Olaghere 19:43

The other sort of differential impact and this is sort of the line of inquiry we take in the paper, is that, okay, we've expanded it, but we haven't actually widen the funnel of terms of the path that people take to actually get to college degree while incarcerated. Because what about those individuals that are struggling to get their GED? Or who don't even, or who are on a waiting list, right, to actually get into a college program, or are competing with access because they have to do so many other things for the sake of, you know, what if they're mandated by their sentence or working towards parole, or what's more just intellectually important for them, or that might be more rehabilitative for their purposes. We're making this argument that, yes, we're expanding, the Pell Grant does reinstate greater access, but for whom, right? So there's sort of the dual nature to this differential impact that we that we pick up on.



Jenn Tostlebe 20:32

Yeah, that's interesting. And and so it's like, how do we actually expand the funnel rather than just the opportunity? So get more people into these GED programs, making it more of a priority maybe within correctional institutions?

A

Ajima Olaghere 20:48

Yeah, we were a bit subversive, admittedly, in in our pressure, like, Okay, this is good. But wait a minute. And it really came down to thinking about, you know, what's the philosophy of corrections, right. Right now it operates, we'll say, and it's sort of very retributive sense. Like, are we really giving people the opportunities that they need to compete and to, you know, and to not return? And so, right, saying that you can literally transform in a very idealistic way, and start this sort of just, very basically, what are the activities that people are engaging in that might be able to serve as sort of these self directed learning opportunities for people?



Jenn Tostlebe 21:23

Yeah. All right. So shall we move into your paper then? I think that's a good starting point.



Ajima Olaghere 21:29

Go for it.



Jenn Tostlebe 21:30

Alright, so the paper that we'll be talking about in this episode is authored by our guest, Ajima, as well as two co-authors, Kristen Kremer, and Carlton Fong. And the paper is called "Learning opportunities while incarcerated: Association of engagement in literacy and numeracy activities with literacy and numeracy skills." So this paper is currently published online and is forthcoming in *Adult Education Quarterly*. So just to provide kind of a quick intro into the paper that's largely from the abstract in your paper. In this paper, Ajima and her co-authors examine whether informal engagement in reading, writing, and numeracy activities is related to incarcerated adults' literacy and numeracy skills. They use data on 1,102 respondents from the 2014 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies—U.S. Prison Study to examine the association between engagement in activities and skills. So hopefully, that was a good brief intro. Okay.



Jenn Tostlebe 22:36

So our first question then is kind of, you know, what is the inspiration or the motivation behind actually writing this paper?



Ajima Olaghere 22:43

It goes back to, you know, me being sort of my former background and experience in teaching and tutoring in a correctional institution for women for five years, like during graduate school and try and staying involved and connected to that community. And having this always knowing that our institutions always can be doing better than what they are, and that we can completely convert them to something different. And also being aware of just following the Pell Grant initiative. And the idea that, you know, where higher education is right now that a lot more could be done in terms of a pipeline, a funnel, right? So if you think about the mission of higher education, it's not about you know, just the students that apply to you, but thinking about beyond them. And so that's sort of where the sort of the very subversive and creative approach came into like, Well, wait a minute,

let's think about people who are shut out from opportunities, what do they do? What's available for them? How do they, how do they adjust? How do they adapt, essentially?



Jose Sanchez 23:40

And I think our next question, which I think is always important to ask is, so why is it important for us to understand this association between educational activities and educational skills?



Ajima Olaghere 23:55

Because we know that like, with educational activities, and the skills you get from those activities, there's a relationship that the more you engage in something or you engage into activities that are tied to some goal or objective, right, you're more likely in this context to be prepared, particularly for adults that we're talking about, right? Who've missed a lot of sort of opportunities to, from a very young age, develop those habits and those skills. And when you're incarcerated, again, this is going to vary, a lot of your time is occupied doing something. Right. And that's something you know, it's going to tie to some skill key to you know, the example I raised earlier about a couple women that I know that have this great skill with AutoCAD because a lot of what they were doing was tied to that so much so that that was a skill that was it all for them. No different than us, you know, being able to have the skill of doing a study because that is all our training is right. To think in a certain way. So yeah.



Jenn Tostlebe 24:50

Yeah. And I mean, the long term implications, which you're getting at to, you know, what can they take with them after release? Yeah. Alright, so to kind of start to get into the framing of your paper, then you really use this construct of self directed learning in the context of adult education. And this is something that I'm not familiar with really, you know, other than just the basic understanding based off of your paper and what the words mean. So can you kind of describe this in more detail, and how it's, you know, framing this relationship between activities and skills?



Ajima Olaghere 25:28

Sure, absolutely. And honestly, all props goes to my co-author Carlton Fong on this. Like he's the educational scholar and he's the one that helped with the framing. And I'm more so brought the equity lens to it, but from what I understand, it's essentially self directed

learning. So learning that you do without an instructor, without a classroom, without sort of a curriculum, you're responsible for yourself. And it's really geared towards sort of adult learning, because the idea is that adults, right, maybe think in the traditional academic sense, whether you know, high school or college, right, are not necessarily, don't have life circumstances that are going to be attuned to being in the classroom all day, or some portion of the day, things like, or attending full time. So the self directed learning is more so about things that you can do, in some sense, unsupervised, right, that helps establish or create the necessary learning or knowledge that you need. So think of, for us in traditional to translate this into our industry, your dissertation phase, that's self directed learning, right? That is all on you check in with your supervisor here and there, what's the progress? But in terms of the methods, the theory, what you're writing, that's all on you. And so we use that same sort of theoretical frame to talk about really engagement in activities where these activities can be seen as self directed learning opportunities. So if I'm someone who is working in the kitchen, for example, and I'm weighing flour, right, I'm using, I'm adjusting temperature, right? Weighing flour, you know, combining things, if we use this self directed learning frame on it, those become ways in which I'm learning about fractions and measurements, for example, I'm learning about sort of the chemical processes of not to combine oil and water, for example, or things like that. So it's really just flipping the lens on, we're learning as we do things, but we don't even realize it. And within this this equity context of for people who are not engaged in formal education programs, are they engaging in things that are still learning opportunities for them that can then be translated into, you know, the eligibility tests, or the writing test that they have to do to get access or admittance into these post secondary education programs?



Jenn Tostlebe 27:37

So this is kind of maybe a silly question, but I'm just curious because it just came up while you're talking. So there's all of these like self help books or like things online, where you can like watch videos with that relate into this idea of self directed learning? Or are we talking more like hands on activities?



Ajima Olaghere 27:55

Given the measure we used in the data set, it's more so those hands on activities, But to your point about, you know, these self help books, that is part of reading, right, which is something that we measured as part of literacy, too. Are you are you just reading material? And how much are you reading that? And what are you reading? Are you reading forms and documents and completing those? Things like that? So it really, you know, if we were to, you know, replicate the study, and you know, have a better data set, quite honestly, it really begs the question that like, or even actually piloted a study, like, if

you were to do something long term along the lines of using or giving a private access to academic journal articles and writing versus, you know, completing forms, what are the differences there? But yeah, so that's what you can think of, I guess, self help is appropriate, where it's just like, it's on you. But it's also, you know, just the idea that you're working towards some objective, like I'm working to master, you know, this formula or to understand this thesis.



Jenn Tostlebe 28:54

Right. Okay. So you hypothesize in this paper that this construct, this idea of self directed learning takes on this different form while in prison or in jail. Can you describe why that was kind of the hypothesis and what that form, you know, how it might look different in a correctional environment?



Ajima Olaghere 29:13

Yeah. So I think the main thing that we were thinking about that this is ultimately a system of control, right? And it's creative control. So it's like, I can't just go to the library and check out a book and, you know, engage in self directed learning. There are programs and things that I have to do, right? And there's politics, there's environmental context that I'm subject to. So there's no total freedom and autonomy there, you're under a system of total control and deprivation, quite honestly. And so what we were trying to get at is the idea that even within the midst of that sort of deprivation, right, there still can be some sort of way to take any engagement and make that into a self directed opportunity. And it really depends on again, what engagement activities exist across these facilities. As we'll talk about soon, it's mostly around things that allow people to write, right, because we noticed that the more sort of higher level skills that are needed, particularly around numeracy, think about the STEM field or knowledge economy, it's not necessarily there. And so the way it looks in institutions is that it's, it's, it's going to be different than, you know, for us to those of us who are not within the system and who are not subject to control. It's, it can be very creative, I think. It's kind of like what we're talking about earlier, where you have these programs that are very engagement level, but they're not solely measured in terms of literacy and things like that. But it's within a system that's designed to keep the prison running for whatever mission that is, what is it it's keep the peace, keep people quiet, things like that, right. So it's that and so that's why it's kind of like this sort of this subversive approach to life. All right, if the system's gonna use you and warehouse you? Right? What can you draw from that? In the midst of that?



Jose Sanchez 30:50

Yeah, that's interesting to think about. Okay, so now we have, I think, a pretty good foundation of the framing for your paper. So I think now we can start, like really getting to the heart of it. And sort of you have two main research questions in this paper. So we want to talk about the first one, which was, what is the relationship between participation in prison education programs, and literacy and numeracy skills? What were your findings on these relationships between participation in prison educational programs and these literacy and numeracy skills?



Ajima Olaghere 31:32

Right, so with the education programs, they performed, as we expected, right, so you saw higher sort of score in literacy and the way we measured. The way literacy was measured in the dataset that we used was writing and reading. And numeracy was measured as in some sense calculations, fractions, just using math and data experience. And so prison education programs performed in a way that we expected, which makes sense because your activities are directly tied to these skills and the more sort of literacy and numeracy activities, engagement in those were less so, particularly numeracy, I don't think we found any effect, nor do we find anything with reading and to get reflection on that. It's probably more so, we can speculate, and say that's probably because of opportunity to read and what you have access to, right, because you think about the life of being incarcerated, like the materials you have in cell, right, just in terms of are you able to have enough material? And do you have a flow of material? And then reading time? All those things. You can think with the different levels of security? And so the only place where we did see some sort of improvement in literacy scores was with writing? And if you think about writing the most basic level, what is that? What does that look like? You're probably writing everyday in some way. Right? A pass to go here or something, some application you have to fill out, if you're writing a report on someone a citation, right? If you're constantly preparing materials, if you're, if you're writing someone, right, if you're sending letters, home, things like that, right? Commissary that fill out your commissary form, right?



Jenn Tostlebe 33:11

All right. So just to kind of recap then for this, this first research question on like formal education and skills, you see this relationship, which was completely expected, just based on you know, what you're doing these programs and the translation into the skills. For the second research question then which you were just talking about as well. It's more based in these creative ways of getting informal education and how that translates, and really looking at reading, writing, and numeracy activities. Really, the only important one was

writing and how it translated. One thing that, which you just talked about it, was writing, but can you kind of elaborate a little bit on some of the like, the activities that were used for operationalizing you know, these reading and numeracy activities?

A

Ajima Olaghere 34:00

Yeah, so this comes directly from the PI..., I should actually probably figure out how to say this correctly. It is the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC, and the Department of Education, I believe Postback Data Set, there's a supplemental data collection for incarcerated individuals. But the writing measures included writing articles, reports, or completing forms. I think that's it was just limited to that. And then your reading activities. Oh, a huge one consisted of reading directions, and directions or instructions, letters, memos, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, financial statements, maps, so great diversity there in terms of the different ways in which we can engage. And then numeracy activities were measured as calculating costs. So commissary, for example, are actually on the job, budgets, fractions, percentages, using a calculator, preparing charts, graphs, or tables. So the other two are quite diverse, which is interesting that despite the diversity of activities that we're able to measure, didn't have any sort of effect that we'd expect. But reading, which is quite simple, I'm sorry, writing, which is quite simple, did.



Jenn Tostlebe 35:13

And I mean, that could just go back to exactly what you were saying is that, you know, writing maybe the most common activity, and some of these other things may not be used very much. And so I was kind of curious if you think that's a limitation of the data set where maybe things like looking at maps or budgeting, those kinds of things maybe aren't used really at all within these institutions?

A

Ajima Olaghere 35:37

Yes, I think that's an excellent follow up question. I think it's, it's more it could ease it's definitely a limitation of data set, in addition to the age of it, it's quite old. I know, it's expensive to collect these things, but it's always helpful. But it's also because it makes you wonder, like, how were these contracts developed? Like, was just sort of like an evaluators impression, or what I think it's the the OECD that also partners on this, their idea of what it means to have, you know, these competencies, these literacies versus what actually goes on in institutions, you know, consistently and those should actually be the measures to see to what extent do people actually engage in them and actually be able to see what

you derive and actually a change in literacy.



Jose Sanchez 36:17

So only engagement in writing activities, and not necessarily the reading or numeracy activities panned out to be a significant predictor of literacy or numeracy skills. Do you have any insight into why the results may have come out the way they did?



Ajima Olaghere 36:35

Yeah, it's, and this is me sort of speculating, I think it kind of goes back to, at a basic level, when you think about what do we need just to communicate and interact, right, and to have that as a still: reading and writing. Although we didn't find anything for reading, but going back to Jenn's point, it could have been how it was actually measured, right? I think writing in particular, is something that we use every day. I mean thinking in a correctional context, there's something that you're doing where you have to translate thoughts to paper in some way. I think it's probably the most prevalent activity that you can engage in, that doesn't require much in terms of, again, thinking back to self directed learning, you don't need an instructor to tell you complete this form. So if I'm going to tell you need to complete a form, you're gonna have to write it. And so I think it really becomes so and that becomes a question about how do you increase or enhance the rigor of the type of writing activities that someone is engaging in, right, and to boost those scores and to, again, to sort of that would then actually might even compel someone or incentivize someone to have to engage with more reading? Because the type of writing that's required, has shifted or has changed?



Jenn Tostlebe 37:47

Yeah. I mean, I know, just from interviews with people who are incarcerated in Texas and in Oregon, that I mean, a lot of them don't really read, and most of them are writing, you know, to family, friends, their kids. So yeah, just maybe it's just a function of what's most likely to occur within institutions.



Ajima Olaghere 38:06

That's a great point, you think about the conditions of confinement, like phone calls are expensive, right? They're actually, they're criminal in terms of what you're charged, right. And then visitation, if you're even close to family, right? So writing becomes like a predominant medium for a number of, to just communicate, for a number of things.



Jenn Tostlebe 38:25

All right. So to get into these implications again, so could you elaborate on some of the implications from your papers findings that would be most relevant to first off the academic community, but then also, like the general public, or policymakers or practitioners within correctional environment?

A

Ajima Olaghere 38:45

Really great question. I think first with for the academic community: replicate. We need to do more work like this, where it's possible. I know that corrections can be blackbox in this country, because access is hard to negotiate and just sort of the aversion to research. But I think being more creative in our approach, and understanding the conditions of confinement and how that's affecting people and their outcomes, while they're incarcerated, but also thinking to the future in terms of reentry. But exploring correctional education more particularly with this with Pell Grants being restored. And I imagine that there is going to be some attached sort of research component to that, but particularly as we see more legislation, and I'm thinking the First Step Act, for example, that's going to yield more data and sort of progress about how there's legislation is impacting the state of incarceration in the United States.

A

Ajima Olaghere 39:35

I'll talk about policymakers last but so practitioners, I think, you know, what we sort of allude to, which is I would say it's really exploratory given the limitations or a dataset and given that, you know, we couldn't be more robust, although we could have but we really wanted to start out with just this premise first. It's sort of like taking this premise and sort of like the exploratory nature of what we did and some of the prompts you might read into it, and think about how do your activities within the facility, and whatever programs that already exist, aligned with the needs of not only, you know, incarcerated individuals, but the staff who you need to help support what the incarcerated individuals are doing, right? I can you want to read and write all I want, but if I don't have that sort of cultural support, right, it's gonna, it's going to be interrupted, that might actually hinder self directed learning. And what's attractive about that is that it's, if you think about or take it to its logical end, it's not asking you to divert resources, but reimagine how your resources are being used, right? And think about, again, that subversive, creative approach, I took, how if I'm someone who's doing, working in the prison industry, or in some sort of job that contributes to the overall functioning of the facility, how can that become an opportunity and of itself, for someone to engage in self directed learning?

A

Ajima Olaghere 40:51

And that sort of leads to policymakers, which is just: listen to your practitioners and your field of scholars who have something to say about this, because the work and the activity that's done on the ground is ultimately what needs to inform policy. Work that can sort of frame the policy goals that we need to see. So in the context of the Department of Education, and this Pell Grants initiative, even to higher ed, that's taking advantage of it, Hey, your your population of students to serve is broader than those who get admitted. Right? That is your future, in some sense. So this financial crisis you're experiencing, like think differently about not even just incarcerate individuals, but people in this country who don't have access to higher ed, putting aside the cost, which is a huge issue, but what are some of the ways in which higher ed can actually impact people in a way that we have more people that are recognizing the value of pursuing, continuing to pursue their education?



Jenn Tostlebe 41:44

Right. And I think it's, I mean, the findings aren't super strong for these informal aspects, of education. But I mean, that could be a whole host of reasons as to why. But thinking about like the implications of that, if we do, if we could shake up the measurements, and try and tap more of these things that are actually happening within institutions, it makes me wonder if this is one avenue of getting education that's possibly on the cheaper side, versus doing, you know, formal programming, that maybe you have to bring in instructors, and do you know, full programs. It's just interesting to think about.

A

Ajima Olaghere 42:23

And it's, it's a great sort of vision that you lay out there. And I think that's what we need to begin to do to begin to, you know, think creatively along those lines and experiment with it. And sort of my sort of vision that sort of parallels, what you're saying is that I envision sort of a pipeline, right? Because what the evidence supports is like, yes, postsecondary educational in correctional institutions is important. Got it, great, but how do we build up to that, right? And I'm thinking of a book, it's called Reform in the Making by Ann Chih Lin, and she's talking about implementation, the importance of implementation context. And I brought that up, because one of the arguments that she makes is that we often don't think about something, I think you reminded me of this, Jenn, is this just like the context itself in which this is happening, right. And that can actually then inform future evaluations of what we need to do differently, as opposed to what I think what we do now is just sort of impose and evaluate, as opposed to. wait, how does this fit in? How does this work? And again, taking advantage of existing things that are happening, and marrying that to some

interventions that we actually want to bring in? So if we're gonna say, higher-end in prison works. Everyone needs to do it. Here's the Pell Grants to do it. Alright, how do you marry that with what's already going on, including the activities there? In particular, people who engage in activities that can help, you know, begin to put them on that path? Yeah, there's a lot of good work that should still be done.



Jenn Tostlebe 43:47

And I love that you brought up that the correctional staff need to be supportive of it. Because I mean, that is a big thing that we're noticing, within prisons in Oregon that, you know, there's some of the people that really, you know, push the cultural change and the programming changes and to get them on board and to see that this is going to make an impact, even if it's not quick. It will in the long term.



Ajima Olaghere 44:11

Oh, yeah, absolutely. And then just anecdotally, that reminds me and Lin talks about this in her book that, you know, depending on the culture you have there, if it's one of like solidarity versus you know, dynamic communication with, you know, incarcerated individuals, you can have a situation where, you know, staff feel like, Well, wait a minute, you're getting an education, a college education, I don't have that. People I know outside this building, don't have that, right. And you don't want that kind of sort of resentful, sort of mentality that could really subvert something good like this. Because the end of the day, like the mission is, the mission is debatable whether it's just warehousing you know, keep people there. But for me, the mission is is like, prisons eventually should become obsolete, not warehouses, and if people were there for long periods of time, like, let's make sure they're doing something that's helpful to them and their families.



Jose Sanchez 45:02

Yeah, I think kind of getting back to what you were saying that you don't want this sort of us versus them type of mentality kind of really being fostered. It reminds me, so I went to, I did my undergrad in like a straight Criminal Justice Department. And so you got a lot of, out in Los Angeles. And so we got a lot of LAPD, LA sheriffs, a lot of correction officers that would come in and get their, their undergrad. And it wasn't terribly uncommon to hear something like, oh, well, they get better dental care than I do, they get better health care than I do, they get three meals a day.

A Ajima Olaghere 45:38
Yeah.

J Jose Sanchez 45:39
So yeah, I think, yeah, this culture, sort of really trying to not have this like oppositional culture. Like, I mean, that's just tough.

A Ajima Olaghere 45:49
It is, and that's why I'm grateful for the next generation of scholars, and both of you, to like, help figure out our way outside of it. And I think that's why I, you know, I reinforce that, and this is me, you know, borrowing from the lesson of Lin's book is that it needs to marry with the institutional values and culture and needs. Staff and incarcerated persons and people who facilitate that whole process. Because, you know, Jose, to your point, it can be done, right. And what we might see. and sometimes is really a measure of just implementation issues, as opposed to philosophically, this effort itself doesn't work, right. It's just the way in which we actually engage in support programs, or activities in this case.



Jenn Tostlebe 46:34

Alright, so to kind of bring this implication section into like, today's time with [the] COVID19 [pandemic], and how COVID has now changed programming within, within institutions. A lot of places, their formal programming is shut down. They're not bringing in, you know, outside people to facilitate the programs, which is slowly changing right now, but for a long time they shut down. And so given that most of the results we've been talking about show support for these formal programs, versus informal programming. What kind of implications do these results have for more of these lockdown situations?

A Ajima Olaghere 47:11
So this is like really ironic, I'm really glad you asked questions. I immediately went to technology. It's like, wait, no, that's the obvious answer. That makes sense. And that's going to vary wildly. But it's just like, wait a minute, writing was meaningful, very, very small impact, but it was meaningful. So really, you thinking about this in terms of COVID? Correspondence programs, right, which is, which is what we did before the advent of technology, right? And before people were able to go in and out of facilities, and so it's like, okay, now you're engaging that sort of that high level of writing that I talked about, because you have to get your things to them in the mail. Everything's written, right, as

opposed to maybe a handout that's given to you that you're reading, right. But now you're writing you're doing that self directed learning via correspondence. So and it's ironic, because it's like, I feel like saying that means like, oh, we're going back to the Dark Ages. But it's like, not necessarily because like, sometimes you can see some facilities are in the dark ages. But it's also it gets back to the equity issue. And like, everyone can do that in some sense. And it reminds me anecdotally of when I was tutoring/teaching, I would hear stories of the women, their roommates who weren't in the college program, who were writing alongside with them, right, who were incentive, who were inspired by those like, Oh, this is what you're doing. I like it, right. And so I think the implication there is that with COVID-19, you can still maintain, obviously, you're posting to your programs, and you can still foster a culture and activities, particularly around writing, given a very sort of like sort of very, very small sort of weak effect that we saw. But like, it'd be interesting to see, like, it COVID-19 presents sort of a natural experiment for us to like, see what happens in that in that regard?



Jenn Tostlebe 48:49

Yeah, totally. And I mean, that could be if you know, if that has a big impact that's combining kind of what you were talking about, where you're combining these informal mechanisms with these formal mechanisms. And who knows, maybe another lockdown will occur or lessons learned to take forward into the future.



Ajima Olaghere 49:08

Absolutely.



Jose Sanchez 49:11

So now we're going to move into a little more of a project that you're working on now. And it's this legitimacy in corrections that we had talked about between the three of us.



Ajima Olaghere 49:24

Yeah.



Jose Sanchez 49:26

So you're working on this project. And we've talked about legitimacy on the podcast before I believe it's episode three with Lee Slocum and Andres Rengifo. But they talked

about it in a policing communities context. And so, just quickly, for our listeners, legitimacy broadly is this measure of a person's obligation to obey, confidence in the police, and positive effect towards the police. But can you tell us a little bit more about your project with legitimacy in corrections.



Jenn Tostlebe 49:59

And about legitimacy.



Ajima Olaghere 50:00

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I'm glad you mentioned, you spoke about legitimacy before, but in the context of policing, because that's one of the arguments that shout out to my colleagues, Dr. Rely Vilciã and Dr. Jeffrey Ward at Temple who helped conceive this project. And actually, the data comes from Dr. Vilciã's prior project from over a decade ago. We said like we can draw, everyone talks so much about policing and legitimacy. Like, there's other parts of the system where police legitimacy is a factor. And in this case, particularly in corrections, given all sorts of decisions that are made that impacts people's lives while they're incarcerated.



Ajima Olaghere 50:36

And so this project is an outgrowth of a different project that sought to assess the impact of a moratorium on parole that was imposed in Pennsylvania, think over like 12 years ago now by former governor Ed Rendell. And he impose the moratorium out of political expediency, because someone who was paroled from the state of Pennsylvania, from a prison in Pennsylvania, I think, was then involved in a murder, and so it became Oh, everyone who is incarcerated and is ready for parole, and I think was incarcerated for a violent offense: No parole for you. So it's like, wait a minute, the due process, the parole process that sort of was just arbitrary and taken out. So that's the sort of birth this into what happened is that they received, we have like over 134 letters. So it's an archival research project, where we had to scan and digitize and transcribe both typed and handwritten-oop writing!-handwritten letters, and created a sort of electronic database. And what essentially we're trying to capture is to what extent can we assess or really not assess, but observe or identify the psychological impacts, but also the legal impacts that letter writers tell us about with respect to this arbitrary sort of decision making that was made for political expediency? And it's getting at the heart of just the legitimacy of really the parole process, but yes, something that affected the parole process. And it's I had a, I had a team meeting with a couple of students who are helping me go through each letter,

because we're right now we're going to do two cycles of encoding. And we're in the first round, and we're doing double coding as we go. And one of the letters a student brought up mentioned that there's this issue of [inaudible] bound up in the idea that what happened to them wasn't fair, right? There was no sort of, say, or due process. This is something I've been working towards, like I, this is everything I've done, and all of a sudden, because of something else that has nothing to do with me, this has happened. I've been discriminated against. It's so it's, it sort of just really unpacks this rich narrative of decision making in within, within correctional institutions, right? It's there's some very sort of similar impacts related to policing and legitimacy that happens when, as people are still in the system.



Jose Sanchez 52:50

How many of these letters are you guys going through?



Ajima Olaghere 52:53

We have 134. And these letters are both from people, from different letters from across Pennsylvania, that also could be from family members we noticed. And some letter writers write more than once. And sometimes the letters, what we've seen so far. Yeah, I think they're all related so far to the issue of the decision that was made. And so basically, once all is said and done, we're probably going to read 134 letters in the aggregate as a group four times, because we're doing double coding and two cycles of it.



Jose Sanchez 53:25

Oh, yeah, hard work.



Jenn Tostlebe 53:30

But I bet some of the letters are incredibly interesting to read, and just understanding, you know, what they're going through, whether as a family member or from someone who's, you know, personally directly being impacted, or was impacted. Is the moratorium still?



Ajima Olaghere 53:47

Yeah. Okay. No, yeah, the moratorium, I think it was only like a couple months. And yeah, it was removed. But I think that in itself, particularly thinking about information flows in prisons, there's asymmetrical information, and you don't know something's happening to

you, until it is about to happen. You can imagine like, what's going to happen, and someone actually talks about that: I have a family member to care for, I have a job lined up, this directly takes that away from me. So it's very rich and detailed. And, and it's not like what we've seen so far, it's not like pages and pages of letters. Like these individual, they're very succinct and detailed on what they're talking about. And that might have been a function of the data collection, when they first solicited the letters.



Jenn Tostlebe 54:25

Well, so you're currently working on the coding up process, and then qualitative analysis. And so I'm not qualitative, really, at all. Jose is more in that. So then what, you have to go through all the coding to draw out different themes? Is that kind of where you're headed with this?



Ajima Olaghere 54:43

So I tend to work, I tend to start qualitative, but I always end up quantitative it's just I just default to mixed methods, which I account for now in my in my research approach, but yeah, so we're doing our first cycle is deductive coding. So we came to the project with some ideas of what we expected to observe around legitimacy. So like decision making; we have constitutionality, like looking about sort of just if there's anything related to that; the conditions of prisons, so the climate, the culture; we're looking at psychological effects, so the strain, the stress, and we're actually capturing negative cases along the way. I wish I could, you know, you can display for your listeners, my database, so I can walk you through this. And so and then as we're doing that we're keeping track of essentially inductive code. So things that are like, Oh, someone's talking about racial discrimination, we should capture that that's meaningful in this context of decision making. Also, other things that we've captured, there's this advice that we see that's a pattern, I think it's again, the result of the original data collection, where the authors were trying to understand the overall impact from a quantitative standpoint. And that second part, the inductive coding, that's going to happen after we go through the deductive. So we're doing this in sort of, like, strict phases so that we can impose some sort of organization to everything we're collecting.



Jose Sanchez 56:02

So you're, like, right in the middle of your coding, what can we sort of start expecting to see the fruits of your labor?



Ajima Olaghere 56:12

Okay, so yes, I appreciate that question. I'm hoping by this summer, or any Yeah, I will say by the summer, we should be in analysis mode. And then I'm hoping that we can get a manuscript out by the end of this calendar year.



Jose Sanchez 56:27

Oh, okay. Great.



Ajima Olaghere 56:29

Yeah, I'm pushing the pedal on this one, because I want it to get out.



Jenn Tostlebe 56:35

Well, you'll have to let us know. You know, when things start to come out. And then we can add it to our website. So people can find it.



Ajima Olaghere 56:44

I would be honored to let you know for sure. Yeah.



Jenn Tostlebe 56:47

Yeah. Sounds very interesting. I'm excited to read that. Legitimacy, I'm working on something right now. It's procedural justice, and legitimacy, and corrections. Hopefully, it'll be done soon. I've been working on it for way too long. So yeah, I'm very interested to see what you come up with.



Ajima Olaghere 57:05

Absolutely, I'll be sure to share. Yeah, we're doing some pretty creative stuff because we had to transcribe all the letters in order to de-identify them. And Dr. Vîlcică came up with this very creative idea. She's like, Oh, we should do inter-transcriber reliability. I was just like, what, how, like, wait a minute, but I found a very sort of creative way to think about that in R, so in an attempt to sort of document our process and talk about how, among a sort of multi-person research team, how we were able to do it to make sure we had things consistently, because, and staying true to the nature of the letters, because if they were

sort of the way things were spelled or worded, we want to, like keep it in its original form, and then also have to account for, was is not transcribed correctly, which affects interpretation or was this truly how they wrote the letter. So yeah, it's been really interesting to do an archival project as a criminologist and then to think about things like how do you report to the field that cares very much about methods, what you did and how you did that?



Jenn Tostlebe 58:09

Well, it sounds like you're documenting it all. So that is the first step right?



Ajima Olaghere 58:14

Yeah. Yeah.



Jenn Tostlebe 58:17

Well, do you have any last comments or things that you'd like to share?



Ajima Olaghere 58:22

I like to give a shout out to two amazing young scholars, that I think people should look out for their names are Jose Sanchez and Jenn Tostlebe. Did I say your last name right?



Jenn Tostlebe 58:34

You did. Crushed it.



Ajima Olaghere 58:36

So shout out to both of you. And thank you for this wonderful opportunity. It's amazing. And I feel so encouraged and can't wait until you graduate.



Jenn Tostlebe 58:45

Thank you.



Jose Sanchez 58:46

Yeah, well, thank you for joining us. We really appreciate it. We find your work really interesting. And we can't wait to see what you put out into the world in the future. And we'll be sure to make people aware of your work.



Ajima Olaghere 59:02

Thank you.



Jose Sanchez 59:03

So we've kind of already talked about this a little bit with your current project. But is there anything else you'd like to plug anything else we should be on the lookout for?



Ajima Olaghere 59:11

I'm terrible at self promotion, I really am. That's part of the job I hate. No.



Ajima Olaghere 59:18

Find me on Twitter, I barely post. And I use it as sort of a photo album or like a word album like oh, I want to hold on to this. And so I'll put in your chat or I guess for your listeners. Forgive me. It's just my first name. My first name, my last name, and my first name is spelled A J I M, as in Maria, A. Last name is O L A G H E R E and that's my Twitter handle and Instagram handel.



Jose Sanchez 59:46

Great. Yeah, thank you again.



Jenn Tostlebe 59:50

That's all the questions we have for you.



Ajima Olaghere 59:52

Okay, excellent. This was fun.



Jenn Tostlebe 59:54

Good. I'm glad. Yeah, it was fun for us to. I was looking forward to it for the whole day.



Jose Sanchez 1:00:03

Yeah, we love doing these episodes and talking to people about the work they're doing.



Ajima Olaghere 1:00:08

It is so fantastic. I seriously, I commend y'all. Like when I was in your position, oh my gosh, I just had my head in the books. I was just trying to survive. And this is amazing so. I'm just gonna go back and listen to your other episodes too.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:00:22

Yeah, thank you.



Ajima Olaghere 1:00:23

Goodness knows we have quarantine. I need something right keep me, keep my mind you know engaged but. Like not watching something that's not useful.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:00:33

Netflix all day.



Ajima Olaghere 1:00:36

Love Netflix. I was like I got a problem. Now I need to stop.



Jose Sanchez 1:00:40

I had some free time yesterday. And so I started watching his YouTube video on zero inflation negative binomial. I was like, this is pretty like this is a productive use of my time. But I did that for like 20 minutes and then I was like, you know what, and I just like left and like started watching the movie.

A Ajima Olaghere 1:01:00
Hey, self directed learning. You just you're taking that break. Your brain needs a break.

J Jose Sanchez 1:01:06
Yeah, especially because I'm pretty sure at some point I like completely got confused about what was happening. I think this is a good time to stop. Get a snack and maybe watch a movie or something.

J Jose Sanchez 1:01:21
Anyways, thank you again. We really appreciate it.

A Ajima Olaghere 1:01:24
Absolutely.

J Jose Sanchez 1:01:25
We can only imagine how busy your schedule must be.

A Ajima Olaghere 1:01:30
Time is what we make of it.

J Jose Sanchez 1:01:32
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