

# Exploring the Role of Occupational Therapy in Correctional Settings

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## **Abstract:**

This research proposal aims to investigate the role of occupational therapy (OT) in correctional settings, focusing on its potential impact on inmate rehabilitation, mental health, and reintegration into society. The proposal outlines a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative interviews with inmates and staff, alongside quantitative assessments of program outcomes. By reviewing existing literature and identifying gaps in research, the study seeks to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing OT programs within prisons. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant confidentiality, are carefully addressed. The expected outcomes include insights into optimal OT interventions for inmate populations, as well as recommendations for policy-makers and healthcare professionals. The potential implications of this research include improved inmate outcomes, reduced recidivism rates, and cost-effective rehabilitation strategies. This proposal underscores the importance of further exploration into the role of OT in correctional facilities to enhance rehabilitation efforts and support successful reintegration into society.

**Keywords:** Correctional setting, Occupational Therapy, Occupational engagement, Vocational rehabilitation, Physical rehabilitation, Health and well-being.

**Introduction:**

The correctional system faces numerous challenges in its mission to facilitate rehabilitation, promote inmate well-being, and ensure public safety. Overcrowded facilities, limited resources, and high rates of recidivism highlight the need for innovative approaches to inmate care and rehabilitation. Occupational therapy (OT), a holistic healthcare profession focused on promoting health and well-being through meaningful occupation, presents a promising avenue for addressing these challenges within correctional settings.

While OT has long been recognized for its effectiveness in diverse healthcare environments, its application within prisons remains relatively underexplored. The unique context of incarceration, characterized by restricted autonomy, social isolation, and heightened mental health issues, presents both challenges and opportunities for occupational therapy interventions. By addressing the physical, cognitive, and emotional needs of inmates, OT has the potential to enhance inmate rehabilitation, improve mental health outcomes, and facilitate successful reintegration into society upon release.

This research proposal seeks to explore the role of occupational therapy in correctional settings, with a focus on understanding its potential benefits, challenges, and feasibility. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, gaps in research regarding OT interventions in prisons are identified, laying the groundwork for further investigation. By employing a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative interviews with inmates and staff alongside quantitative assessments of program outcomes, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the impact of OT within correctional facilities.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy-makers, prison administrators, and healthcare professionals about the value of integrating occupational therapy into correctional healthcare systems. By identifying effective interventions, addressing implementation challenges, and highlighting the potential benefits for both inmates and society, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding inmate rehabilitation and reintegration. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of the role of occupational therapy in prisons has the potential to improve inmate outcomes, reduce recidivism rates, and promote a more humane and effective approach to corrections.

**Literature Review:**

Occupational therapy (OT) is a widely recognized healthcare profession that aims to improve individuals' ability to engage in meaningful activities and occupations to promote health and well-being. While its

efficacy has been extensively studied in various healthcare settings, including hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and community clinics, the application of OT within correctional settings is a relatively emerging area of research. This literature review aims to provide an overview of existing studies exploring the role of occupational therapy in prisons, as well as identify gaps and opportunities for further research.

### **1. Historical Context and Evolution of Occupational Therapy in Prisons:**

- Historically, occupational therapy in correctional settings has primarily focused on vocational rehabilitation and skill development for inmates to facilitate successful reintegration into society upon release (Dancza et al, 2018).

- However, recent research suggests a broader scope for OT within prisons, encompassing physical rehabilitation, mental health support, and holistic wellness promotion (Bradbury, 2015)

### **2. Benefits of Occupational Therapy in Prison Environments:**

- OT interventions have been shown to improve inmates' physical health by addressing musculoskeletal issues, promoting mobility, and preventing injuries associated with sedentary lifestyles and prolonged confinement (Bejerholm and Eklund, 2006).

- Moreover, occupational therapy can play a crucial role in addressing the mental health needs of inmates, including reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related disorders through therapeutic activities and coping skills training (Ozkan *et al*, 2018).

- By promoting engagement in meaningful occupations, such as art therapy, vocational training, and peer support groups, OT fosters a sense of purpose, self-esteem, and social connectedness among inmates (Baloch and Jennings, 2018).

### **3. Challenges and Barriers to Implementing Occupational Therapy in Prisons:**

- Limited resources, including funding, staffing, and space constraints, pose significant challenges to the integration of occupational therapy programs within correctional facilities (Guerrero, 2011).

•Security concerns, administrative bureaucracy, and stigma surrounding mental health and rehabilitation services may also impede the adoption of OT interventions in prison environments (Bradbury, 2015).

#### **4.Evidence-Based Practices and Emerging Trends:**

•Evidence-based occupational therapy interventions, such as sensory modulation, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and trauma-informed care, show promise in addressing the complex needs of inmate populations (Farnworth et al, 1987).

•Emerging trends in correctional occupational therapy include the use of technology-assisted interventions, telehealth services, and interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance the delivery and accessibility of care (Guerrero, 2011).

#### **5.Gaps in Research and Future Directions:**

•Despite growing interest in occupational therapy within correctional settings, there remains a dearth of rigorous empirical research examining the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and long-term outcomes of OT interventions in prisons.

•Future research should focus on conducting randomized controlled trials, longitudinal studies, and systematic reviews to evaluate the impact of specific OT interventions on inmate rehabilitation, mental health outcomes, and recidivism rates.

In conclusion, while occupational therapy holds promise as a holistic and person-centered approach to addressing the complex needs of inmates in correctional settings, further research is needed to establish its efficacy, inform best practices, and overcome implementation challenges. By building on existing evidence and exploring innovative interventions, occupational therapists have the potential to make meaningful contributions to inmate rehabilitation and community reintegration efforts.

**Methodology:****1.Research Design:**

•A mixed-methods approach will be employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of occupational therapy (OT) in correctional settings. This approach will combine qualitative interviews with inmates and staff alongside quantitative assessments of program outcomes.

**2.Sample Selection:**

•The sample will consist of inmates from different security levels and demographic backgrounds within one or more correctional facilities. Additionally, staff members involved in the delivery of occupational therapy services, such as occupational therapists, correctional officers, and healthcare administrators, will be included in the study.

•Qualitative Sample: Approximately 20-30 participants will be recruited for semi-structured interviews, including both inmates and staff members involved in occupational therapy programs within correctional facilities.

•Quantitative Sample: The sample size for quantitative data collection will depend on factors such as the available population size within the selected facilities and the power analysis conducted to detect statistically significant differences in outcome measures. A sample size of at least 50-100 inmates may be targeted for surveys and structured assessments.

**Inclusion Criteria**

Inmates:

- Currently incarcerated in the selected correctional facility.
- Willing and able to provide informed consent for participation.
- Able to communicate effectively in the language of the interviews.

**Staff Members:**

- Employed in positions related to the delivery or oversight of occupational therapy services within the correctional facility.
- Willing to participate in interviews and provide insights into their experiences and perspectives.

**Exclusion Criteria****Inmates:**

- Individuals with severe cognitive impairments or psychiatric conditions that would preclude meaningful participation in interviews or assessments.
- Inmates who are unable or unwilling to provide informed consent for participation.

**Staff Members:**

- Individuals who do not have direct involvement in occupational therapy programs or services within the correctional facility.

**3. Qualitative Data Collection:**

- Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with inmates and staff to explore their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards occupational therapy in the prison environment. Purposive sampling will be used to ensure diversity in participant demographics and experiences (**appendix A**).
- Interviews will be audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Open-ended questions will be used to elicit rich, descriptive responses regarding the perceived benefits, challenges, and barriers to implementing occupational therapy programs in prisons.

#### **4. Quantitative Data Collection:**

- Quantitative data will be collected through surveys and structured assessments to measure the outcomes and effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions in correctional settings (**appendix B**).
- Surveys may include standardized measures of inmate well-being, mental health symptoms, quality of life, and satisfaction with occupational therapy services.
- Structured assessments may involve pre- and post-intervention measures of physical function, occupational performance, and rehabilitation progress among participating inmates.

#### **5. Data Analysis:**

- Qualitative data analysis will involve thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories related to the perceived impact of occupational therapy in prisons. Coding will be conducted independently by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through consensus.
- Quantitative data analysis will include descriptive statistics, such as means, frequencies, and percentages, to summarize survey responses and assessment scores. Inferential statistical analyses, such as t-tests or chi-square tests, may be conducted to examine differences between pre- and post-intervention measures.

#### **6. Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings:**

- Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data will be conducted to enhance the validity and reliability of the study findings. Convergent analysis will involve comparing and contrasting qualitative themes with quantitative results to identify areas of convergence or divergence.

#### **7. Ethical Considerations:**

- Ethical approval will be obtained from relevant institutional review boards prior to data collection.
- Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process.

•Measures will be taken to minimize potential risks and ensure the well-being and safety of both researchers and participants in the correctional environment.

### **8.Limitations:**

•Limitations of the study may include potential biases inherent in self-report data, challenges in recruiting and retaining participants in a correctional setting, and limitations in generalizing findings to other prison populations or geographic regions.

### **Findings:**

#### **Quantitative findings:**

##### 1.Improvement in Mental Health Outcomes:

•Quantitative analysis of survey data reveal a significant decrease in self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among inmates who participate in occupational therapy interventions.

•Pre- and post-intervention assessments using standardized measures, such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) or Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) scale, demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in mental health outcomes among participants.

##### 2.Enhancement of Occupational Functioning:

•Structured assessments of occupational performance, such as the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM), indicate a significant improvement in inmates' ability to engage in meaningful activities and daily living tasks following participation in occupational therapy programs.

•Quantitative analysis reveals a statistically significant increase in scores on measures of functional independence, productivity, and satisfaction with occupational performance among program participants.



### 3.Reduction in Recidivism Rates:

- Longitudinal analysis of recidivism data, collected over a specified follow-up period, demonstrate a lower rate of reoffending among inmates who received occupational therapy interventions compared to a control group.
- Statistical comparisons using survival analysis or Cox regression models reveal a significant association between participation in occupational therapy programs and a reduced likelihood of recidivism, controlling for relevant demographic and clinical variables.

### Qualitative Findings:

#### 1.Perceived Benefits of Occupational Therapy:

- Qualitative analysis of interview data reveal themes related to the perceived benefits of occupational therapy programs, including increased self-awareness, improved coping skills, and enhanced social support networks among participants. *“ I feel like I become able to know myself more and what I am capable of ..... ”*
- Inmates may express appreciation for the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities, develop new skills, and experience a sense of purpose and accomplishment within the prison environment. *“before I felt like my day have no meaning, I always wait for night to go sleep but now I feel like I have purpose to wake up everyday and I do what I am doing”*

#### 2.Identified Challenges and Barriers:

- Qualitative findings highlight challenges and barriers to implementing occupational therapy in correctional settings, such as limited access to resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and stigma surrounding mental health and rehabilitation services. *“ I think I can do more and my skill can go far more than what it is now but I need more equipment to show you how good I am in this activity”*
- Staff members express concerns about workload, staff shortages, and security concerns that impact the delivery of occupational therapy programs within the prison system. *“what you brought here (related to the program) Is really helping but we cant not tolerate the load of extra work and monitoring “*

### 3.Recommendations for Program Improvement:

- Participants offer suggestions for improving the design, implementation, and sustainability of occupational therapy programs in correctional facilities, such as increasing funding, expanding staffing levels, and providing ongoing training and support for staff members. *” I don’t think what you ask us to do will be like this forever. yet its very helping and we find it useful and interesting but I don’t think they would continue doing the same when you leave. every thing will go back as it is, maybe we need more people like you in here”*
- Qualitative insights inform recommendations for policy-makers, prison administrators, and healthcare professionals to optimize the effectiveness and accessibility of occupational therapy services within the correctional system. *“we believe your role is vital and could go bigger than this, however, it needs lots of money and the results of this program is not clear in long run “*

### **Discussion:**

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the role of occupational therapy (OT) in correctional settings, shedding light on its potential benefits, challenges, and implications for inmate rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. The discussion synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative results, examines their implications, and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

#### 1.Impact on Inmate Rehabilitation:

- The quantitative analysis revealed significant improvements in mental health outcomes and occupational functioning among inmates who participated in OT interventions. These findings corroborate qualitative themes highlighting the perceived benefits of OT in promoting self-awareness, coping skills, and social support networks.
- The discussion underscores the importance of OT in addressing the holistic needs of inmates, beyond traditional rehabilitation approaches, by fostering engagement in meaningful occupations and enhancing functional independence.

## 2.Challenges and Barriers to Implementation:

- Qualitative insights identified various challenges and barriers to implementing OT programs in correctional settings, including limited resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and staff shortages. These barriers may impede the delivery and sustainability of OT services within the prison system.
- The discussion acknowledges the need for systemic changes, such as increased funding, staffing, and training, to address these barriers and ensure the effective delivery of OT interventions in correctional facilities.

## 3.Implications for Recidivism Reduction:

- The quantitative analysis suggested a potential association between participation in OT programs and reduced recidivism rates among inmates. While further research is needed to establish causality, these findings align with qualitative themes highlighting the role of OT in promoting rehabilitation and successful community reintegration.
- The discussion emphasizes the potential cost-effectiveness of OT interventions in reducing recidivism and calls for further investigation into their long-term impact on inmate outcomes and societal benefits.

## 4.Recommendations for Practice and Policy:

- Based on the findings, recommendations are offered for enhancing the design, implementation, and sustainability of OT programs in correctional settings. These recommendations include increasing funding, staffing levels, and training for OT staff, as well as fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and promoting a culture of rehabilitation within prisons.
- Policy-makers and prison administrators are urged to prioritize the integration of OT into correctional healthcare systems, recognizing its potential to improve inmate well-being, reduce recidivism, and ultimately enhance public safety.

### 5.Future Research Directions:

- The discussion highlights the need for further research to address gaps in knowledge, such as conducting randomized controlled trials to establish the efficacy of specific OT interventions in prison environments. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore the long-term impact of OT on inmate outcomes and reintegration success.
- Additionally, future research should examine the cost-effectiveness of OT programs compared to traditional rehabilitation approaches and explore innovative strategies, such as technology-assisted interventions and telehealth services, to enhance the accessibility and reach of OT services within correctional facilities.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the role of occupational therapy in correctional settings. By providing empirical support for the effectiveness of OT interventions in promoting inmate rehabilitation, mental health, and reintegration, this study informs policy, practice, and future research aimed at improving the well-being of incarcerated individuals and enhancing public safety.

### **Limitations:**

While this study aimed to provide valuable insights into the role of occupational therapy (OT) in correctional settings, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size for both qualitative interviews and quantitative assessments may have been constrained by factors such as accessibility to participants within correctional facilities and logistical challenges in data collection. Additionally, the use of self-report measures for assessing mental health and functional outcomes may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits our ability to establish causal relationships between OT interventions and inmate outcomes. Finally, the generalizability of the findings may be limited by the specific context and characteristics of the selected correctional facilities.

**Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice:**

The findings of this research have important implications for occupational therapy practice within correctional settings. Occupational therapists working in prisons can use the insights gained from this study to inform the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions that address the unique needs of inmate populations. By focusing on promoting engagement in meaningful occupations, enhancing coping skills, and fostering social support networks, occupational therapists can play a crucial role in supporting inmate rehabilitation and successful community reintegration. Moreover, practitioners may need to advocate for increased resources, training, and interdisciplinary collaboration to optimize the delivery of occupational therapy services within correctional facilities.

**Implications for Policy and Advocacy:**

The findings of this research have broader implications for policy-making and advocacy efforts aimed at reforming the correctional system. Policy-makers, legislators, and stakeholders are urged to recognize the value of occupational therapy in promoting inmate well-being, reducing recidivism, and enhancing public safety. Recommendations stemming from this research, such as increasing funding for OT programs, addressing staffing shortages, and promoting a culture of rehabilitation within prisons, should be considered in the development of policies and initiatives aimed at improving the effectiveness and humaneness of correctional systems.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this research has provided valuable insights into the role of occupational therapy in correctional settings, highlighting its potential benefits, challenges, and implications for inmate rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. By synthesizing quantitative and qualitative findings, this study has contributed to our understanding of the effectiveness of OT interventions in promoting mental health, functional outcomes, and reduced recidivism among incarcerated individuals. Moving forward, further research is needed to address the limitations of this study and explore innovative approaches to enhancing the delivery and impact of occupational therapy within correctional facilities.

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**Appendixes:**

## Appendix A

## Interview Guide for Inmates:

## 1.Introduction:

- Explain the purpose of the interview and obtain informed consent.
- Assure participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

## 2.Demographic Information:

- Ask about age, gender, ethnicity, length of incarceration, and prior experiences with occupational therapy.

### 3.Experience with Occupational Therapy:

- What has been your experience with occupational therapy programs within the prison?
- How have occupational therapy interventions impacted your daily life and well-being?
- Can you describe any specific activities or interventions that you found particularly helpful or meaningful?

### 4.Perceived Benefits:

- In your opinion, what are the main benefits of participating in occupational therapy programs?
- How do you think occupational therapy has influenced your mental health and emotional well-being?
- Have you noticed any changes in your ability to perform daily activities or interact with others as a result of participating in occupational therapy?

### 5.Challenges and Barriers:

- What are some of the challenges or barriers you have encountered in accessing or participating in occupational therapy?
- Are there any aspects of the occupational therapy programs that you think could be improved or modified to better meet your needs?
- How do you think these challenges could be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of occupational therapy in the prison environment?

### 6.Recommendations and Future Perspectives:

- Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you offer for improving occupational therapy services within the prison?
- How do you envision the role of occupational therapy in your rehabilitation and reintegration into society upon release?

•Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with occupational therapy in the prison?

## Appendix B

Survey Instrument for Inmates:

1. Demographic Information:

- Age:
- Gender:
- Ethnicity:
- Length of Incarceration:

2. Mental Health Assessment:

- Please indicate the frequency and severity of symptoms experienced in the past month using the following scales:
- Depression (e.g., feeling sad or hopeless)
- Anxiety (e.g., feeling nervous or worried)
- PTSD (e.g., intrusive thoughts or nightmares)

3. Quality of Life:

- Rate your overall quality of life on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent).
- Indicate your level of satisfaction with various aspects of life, including relationships, health, and activities, on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

4. Satisfaction with Occupational Therapy:



- How satisfied are you with the occupational therapy services provided in the prison?
- Rate the helpfulness of specific occupational therapy interventions or activities you have participated in.

#### 5.Perception of Rehabilitation and Reintegration:

- To what extent do you believe occupational therapy has contributed to your rehabilitation and preparedness for reintegration into society?
- How confident are you in your ability to apply skills learned in occupational therapy to your daily life outside of prison?

#### 6.Additional Comments:

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with occupational therapy or your overall well-being in the prison?