

Recidivism in Ohio: The role of Agriculture in the Rehabilitation of Inmates

Good morning. I would like to take a few minutes of today's discussions to bring to your attention a social innovation opportunity birthed from a technology endeavor. My name is Aurea L. Rivera. I am a retired US government public servant who believes that lessons learned from Department of Defense Activities associated with Data Analysis will help bring needed innovation to the commercial, public sectors. I am the owner of a small business focused on data analytics in agriculture. It is this pursuit that led me to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) and their agriculture activities. The goal of this paper is to make the case that the reduction in recidivism reported by ODRC is not a random phenomenon but an emerging opportunity that merit analysis, benchmarking, and implementation not only in our state of Ohio but across the nation.

The word recidivism is part of ODRC's mission: To reduce recidivism among those we touch. Recidivism¹ is one of the most fundamental concepts in criminal justice. It refers to a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime. Recidivism is measured by criminal acts that resulted in rearrest, reconviction or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the prisoner's release. The Bureau of Justice Statistics² reporting paints an alarming trend where figures as high as 67.5% of prisoners released in 1994 were rearrested within three years. More conservative estimates place the US recidivism rates at 44 percent. Compared to those figures, recidivism in our state of 27.1% (as reported by ODRC Director Gary Mohr³) is a success. However, for those 27% of people touching families, neighborhoods, and cities the opportunities for rehabilitation were missed.

¹ <http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/welcome.aspx>

² <http://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/recidivism.cfm>

³ http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2014/03/state_report_recidivism_rate_i.html

Agriculture and farming may provide ODRC another tool in their rehabilitation mission strategy. In an article titled “Ohio’s prison farms help inmates experience freedom, responsibility”⁴, one line captured my attention. The recidivism rate for the “Ohio Meat Processing Center in Pickaway County has a recidivism of 8.7%”. I believe these results did not happen by accident, so I decided to investigate further.

The State of Ohio owns 19000 acres which are allocated to the ODRC in support of the prison system. My initial conversations with Ohio Penal Industries leaders revealed that little to no technology innovation is involved when it comes to the methods used for inmates involved in agriculture activities. While the number of inmates selected for field crops and livestock activities is relatively small (when compared to the penal population at large), the opportunity exists for agriculture innovation to expand across the prison system in Ohio. The economic ledger is compelling: 7300 acres are associated with field crops. A little math will show you that the market production for a 50-50 split of corn and soybeans can bring close to \$4.0M in revenue to the State of Ohio. The same business case can be made for the livestock efforts at the prisons.

However, the most important take away is the education, formative legacy for the inmates involved in this program. The technology wave embracing agriculture is global in nature. For the US to continue to feed the World we will need to integrate technology at a faster pace than what we have today. The success of this innovation wave requires individuals properly trained. These new jobs openings are well paying jobs with opportunities for advancement at rural communities and even in the inner cities, because data analytics and social networks know no physical boundaries.

The challenge: we need to study, benchmark the method used by ODRC as part of the farming strategy.

This analysis needs to include the methodology used for the inmate selection, the agriculture methods

⁴ <http://www.farmanddairy.com/news/ohios-prison-farms-help-inmates-experience-freedom-responsibility/182513.html>

used, the training and education provided to the inmates, as well as the lessons learned from prior prison agriculture participants in this Program (just to mention a few). Once the program attributes are defined, a pilot program can be constructed to extend this farming initiative across other locations in Ohio, Midwest states, and the rest of the nation.

In closing, our initial research on the ODRC agricultural efforts and recidivism found great results with very little appreciation of the process involved in getting those great results. Ignorance is not bliss in this case but a missed opportunity. Rehabilitation and public safety are two sides of the same coin. I respectfully propose technology agriculture as one more step that will help capture this social innovation opportunity.

Thanks.

Respectfully Yours,

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