

9-22-2022

## Understanding volunteerism: the role of the participant in non-clinical correctional programming

H. Daniel Butler

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, hdbutler@unomaha.edu*

Michael Campagna

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Ryan E. Spohn

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, rspohn@unomaha.edu*

Katelynn Towne

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/criminaljusticefacpub>

 Part of the [Criminology Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Butler, H.D., Campagna, M.F., Spohn, R., & Towne, K. (2022). Understanding volunteerism: The role of the participant in non-clinical correctional programming. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 61(7), 357-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2022.2116520>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criminology and Criminal Justice Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

# Understanding volunteerism: The role of the participant in non-clinical correctional programming

H. Daniel Butler<sup>a</sup>, Michael F. Campagna<sup>b</sup>, Ryan Spohn<sup>b</sup>, and Katelynn Towne<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA;

<sup>b</sup>Nebraska Center for Justice Research, University of Nebraska, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

To cite this article: H. Daniel Butler, Michael F. Campagna, Ryan Spohn & Katelynn Towne (2022) Understanding volunteerism: the role of the participant in non-clinical correctional programming, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 61:7, 357-374, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2022.2116520>

## KEYWORDS

prison programming; rehabilitation; vocational programming; reentry; volunteerism; community corrections

## ABSTRACT

Most incarcerated individuals do not participate in prison programming, which may be due to the limited availability of programs or the voluntaristic nature of programming. Most incarcerated individuals are provided the opportunity to select their own non-clinical programming. This voluntaristic approach to program participation provides an opportunity to explore the characteristics of who opts into non-clinical programming when given the choice, an inquiry that acknowledges potential practical and ethical limitations to a non-clinical delivery of programming. In this study, we utilize administrative data from a Midwestern state to understand who volunteers for correctional programming in institutional and community settings. Findings reveal days incarcerated and gender are the strongest predictors of volunteerism for a broad array of correctional programs. Implications include a deeper understanding of volunteer characteristics that may assist agencies to adjust strategies aimed at improving correctional outcomes.

## **Introduction**

Policymakers, correctional administrators, and the public support the use of programming to reform and assist correctional clients in developing pro-social attitudes (Byrne, 2020). Programming addresses barriers to successful reentry following release, including anti-social attitudes and challenges with housing, employment, interpersonal skillsets, mental health, and substance abuse (Travis, 2005). Participation and completion of programming may provide several benefits following release from prison that include reductions in reoffending, meaningful employment, sobriety, improvements in interpersonal and thinking skillsets, and managing emotions (Duwe, 2013; Taxman & Caudy, 2015).

Unlike programming services that take place in the community in lieu of punishment or as a requirement for community supervision, individuals in custodial settings may have less motivation to comply and participate in prison programs if such participation is not clearly tied to the likelihood of early release (Clear, 2007; Phelps, 2011). Although these individuals may not be “coerced” to participate in custodial programming, prisons confine individuals against their will who vary considerably in their responsiveness to treatment (Gendreau & Smith, 2011). As such, it is of great interest to identify the individuals who volunteer and the individuals who refrain from volunteering for correctional programming. Whereas most evaluations of correctional programming tend to compare treatment and comparison groups that are similar on several characteristics, the current study takes a broader approach to understand who volunteers for programming. In particular, we examine the characteristics of individuals who volunteer and participate in a vocational and life skills program (i.e., non-clinical reentry-based programming). In doing so, we seek to provide insight into the factors that are associated with volunteerism in reentry programs. While we do not explore the merits of mandatory versus voluntary programming or the benefits of matching assessed needs to appropriate programming as others have (for an extensive review, see Long, Sullivan, Wooldredge, Pompoco, & Lugo, 2019), our study examines the correlates of voluntary program participation.

## **Program volunteerism and treatment initiation in correctional settings**

A longstanding topic of academic inquiry is the extent to which states provide incarcerated individuals with the opportunity to participate in programming (Byrne, 2020; Phelps, 2011). In a study of program participation, Phelps (2011) finds that, between 1979 and 2000, less than 25% of incarcerated individuals received any academic programming and less than 10% of incarcerated individuals received any vocational training. In a separate study, Petersilia (2011) finds that approximately 50% of individuals released from California prisons in 2007 did not participate in any prison program. Similarly, the Office of the Attorney General (2019) highlights low rates of program participation with just under half of federally incarcerated individuals engaging in any programming. This report also indicates that less than 20% of federally incarcerated individuals participated in any technical or vocational programming (Office of the Attorney General, 2019). It is worth noting that these program participation percentages are similar to those provided by Petersilia (1979) almost three decades earlier who found that approximately 41% of incarcerated individuals participated in some type of treatment program. The question then becomes whether the lack of program participation is due to a lack of availability of prison programming (Phelps, 2011), a de-emphasis on its importance in facilities, or low volunteerism and treatment initiation rates (Byrne, 2020). Another consideration is that the availability and type of programming differs between prisons that house men and women (see Crittenden & Koons-Witt, 2017; Morash, Haarr, & Rucker, 1994). Although a historical examination on program participation and availability is beyond the scope of this study (see Phelps, 2011 for an empirical assessment of programming between the 1970s and 1990s), it is important to be mindful of this context when examining program volunteerism and treatment initiation.

Program volunteerism and treatment initiation are terms that describe an individual's willingness to engage in a treatment program (Jackson & Innes, 2000; Petersilia, 1979; Vigessaa, Bergseth, & Jens, 2016). It is important to provide a brief description of the terms used in this study that includes volunteerism and participation. We use the term "volunteer" to describe an individual willing to enroll

and participate in a non-clinical correctional program. "Participation" includes the action of enrolling and participating in correctional programs. To date, there are few studies that examine or differentiate between volunteerism and participation, and the literature is largely limited on volunteerism as compared to program participation. Related to corrections, Petersilia (1979) identifies the importance of understanding program volunteerism and treatment initiation in that it helps align the clients for programming with treatment goals. In other words, such a strategy identifies who volunteers and initiates programming to assess whether this group differs from the ideal candidates for program participation. Although most research on correctional programming typically includes process or outcome evaluations, such as whether a program reduces recidivism (see Byrne, 2020; Duwe & Clark, 2015; Lee, 2019), a growing body of literature identifies the importance of understanding program volunteerism and treatment initiation (Jackson & Innes, 2000; Vigesa et al., 2016). This literature finds that incarcerated individuals who engage in prison programming differ from non-volunteers in several ways. In the following paragraphs, we provide an overview of prior research on program volunteerism in addition to identifying correlates that merit inclusion in multivariable studies of treatment initiation.

Prior research provides evidence that program participation may result in a lower likelihood of recidivism and an increase in post-release employment, but it is important to note that differences in methodological rigor may influence these findings (Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). One strategy to assess methodological rigor is to examine the extent to which researchers adjust or control for the absence of a treatment effect (the counterfactual). Another is to examine the unique characteristics of program participants as compared to non-participants. For instance, Duwe and Clark (2015) identify several differences between program participants and non-participants in a cognitive-behavioral program. These differences include criminal history, commitment offense, and secondary education with participants more likely to have a violent commitment offense and secondary degree.

Related to the current study, we include commitment offense and capture in

prison problematic behaviors through misconducts (e.g., rule violations while incarcerated) and work assignment termination. Individuals incarcerated with more serious crimes or who engage in greater levels of misconduct are more likely to receive higher security placements that may reduce programming opportunities (Burdon, Farabee, Prendergast, Messina, & Cartier, 2002). This may also occur because correctional administrators have concerns with institutional safety, which may be compromised if these individuals are in lower-security settings receiving programming (Burdon et al., 2002). Thus, these characteristics serve as proxies for administrative decisions to limit or reduce program participation. It is important to note, however, that one study using nationally representative data of incarcerated individuals finds a violent commitment offense increased the likelihood of participating in educational and vocational programming (Chamberlain, 2012).

Program participants may also differ from non-participants in the amount of time served in prison. Individuals with more time served may have increased opportunities to engage in programming, and these individuals may also have greater knowledge of the programs that exist within a facility or when preparing for release to the community. Similar to how researchers use time served as a measure to capture opportunity to engage in prison misconduct (Flanagan, 1980), it is necessary to include time served in multivariable models that capture participation in programming. In a study of program participation among females in the corrections system (e.g., half-way houses and incarceration), Vigessaa et al. (2016) observe that increases in time served may coincide with increases in program participation. Additionally, in a study examining adjustment to prison across different strata of time served in prison, Butler (2019) finds that individuals with less time served filed fewer grievances (e.g., complaints) than those with more time served. One explanation for this finding is that individuals recently admitted to a prison may not be knowledgeable of the formal policies that govern complaints. Applied to this study, individuals recently admitted to a prison or who have less time served may not be aware of the various vocational, educational, and cognitive-behavioral programs that are offered within a prison. These individuals also may be focused on transitioning to a secure facility and less interested in

programming designed to address reentry barriers.

### **Complexities of examining program volunteerism and treatment initiation**

Some may believe that program participation is the result of mandatory assignment by case managers (i.e., corrections officers, community corrections officers, other service providers). However, developing, implementing, and recruiting for correctional programs are difficult tasks that require extensive knowledge of modalities designed to promote behavioral change, sufficient tangible and cognitive resources, dedication, and perseverance to succeed. Participation rates in facilities have some assistance from coercive processes (e.g., early release, extra privileges) (Clear, 2007; Phelps, 2011), extensive free-time, and sheer boredom (de Viggiani, 2007). Additionally, programming services in the community require even more dedication on the part of participants and case managers due to fewer incentives (and inveiglements) to attend and complete programming and much less structure in everyday activities (Maycock, McGuckin, & Morrison, 2020). Taken together, the literature on program volunteerism and treatment initiation in corrections is growing but limited, and additional studies that consider the sources of selection bias by program type are needed to better align clients with treatment.

There is a limited body of research examining the correlates of program volunteerism and treatment initiation in correctional settings. One apparent explanation for this dearth of research is that it is difficult to disentangle volunteer bias, or self-selection bias, from the assignment process of correctional programming. It also may be assumed that the process and selection of individuals into programming is in the complete hands of the agency (Austin, 2009), but rather many agencies and service providers cannot force individuals to participate in programming designed to address obstacles in the reentry process not directly related to clinical treatment (Long et al., 2019). This gap in understanding in research and policy circles alike makes it difficult to develop a stronger evidence-base to understand the differences between program volunteer and non-volunteers.

## **Nebraska's vocational and life skills program (VLS)**

VLS is a statewide reentry program that provides competitive grant funding to multiple community resource organizations and is administered by the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS). Selected organizations provide reentry support and services to currently and (recently) formerly incarcerated individuals free of charge, both in facilities and the community, over a fixed grant cycle. Services include prerelease counseling, case management, educational course, and training in specific trades. Some programming is cognitive-based, but most is pragmatically based—addressing or educating one on how to navigate specific barriers to the reentry and reintegration process. Almost all programming is considered non-clinical, as only one program is required to be delivered by licensed professionals and it is delivered sparingly (Moral Reconciliation Therapy). VLS programs may be classified into several types that include programs on cognitive thinking, occupational preparation, and higher education. Each grantee generally provides each type of programming, but their strengths in one over the other two are considerable. Seeing the importance of information-sharing and referral-granting networks and the necessity of referring volunteers to the grantees that best suit their needs, VLS allows for a pluralist mode of service delivery.

NDCS administrators have made considerable progress in guiding VLS to utilize evidence-based practices in corrections, such as Motivational Interviewing, referring clients to programs that align with client needs, and prioritizing dosage based on risk level. While case managers, reentry specialists, and community supervision officers (i.e., Parole and Probation departments) develop plans for individuals that recommend programs that have the capacity to address the individual's needs, participation remains voluntary. Typically, successful completion of VLS programs in facilities following official referrals bodes well for individuals seeking parole. Still, there are undocumented instances where individuals are removed from programming, or denied programming access due to disciplinary concerns. These determinations are made by case workers, corrections officers, or programming staff on a case-by-case basis and assumedly are limited to repeat



violent offenders. There is no data currently collected on these determinations, which remains a limitation in the present study.

### **Current study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristics of volunteers who participate in non-clinical correctional programs using data from a variety of VLS programs offered to individuals under the supervision of Nebraska correctional agencies. Specifically, we examine the correlates of individuals who volunteer and participate in programming in a custodial (prison) setting and in the community (post-release). While a separation of those referred and those not referred to programming is impossible in this study given data restrictions, prior to beginning this study the research team investigated the extent to which programming is referred. We concluded that nearly everyone with a tentative release date in custody is referred to programming, and those on parole or probation are sporadically referred to VLS programming. Thus, we assume there is no systematic bias in referrals, but the potential remains. Further, many become aware of a VLS program via word-of-mouth, facility video promotions, and widely distributed program fliers. Regardless of referrals, individuals are inundated with media describing program components, making it highly unusual for someone in these facilities to not be aware of the opportunities for program enrollment.

We also examine the correlates of individuals who participate in the most programming during their custodial supervision. It is important to note that we do not seek to evaluate these programs, but rather to identify characteristics of individuals who volunteered and participated in these programs. Thus, our primary outcome is participation. We address the following research questions:

1. What are the individual characteristics associated with program involvement in a custodial setting and in the community?
2. What are the individual characteristics of individuals who receive the most programs during their custodial supervision?

### **Data and methods**

Data for this study was provided by the NDCS and includes a release cohort of all incarcerated adult individuals between July 1, 2014 and June 30, 2018. In total, 10,016 individuals were released from prison during this time. This release cohort was selected because VLS programming in Nebraska began during the summer of 2014. As discussed in the literature review, VLS programming includes a broad range of available programs that cover a variety of areas aimed at helping people reenter the community, such as cognitive behavioral programming, occupational programming, and educational programming. The number of VLS volunteers in the sample of released individuals is 1306 and the number of non-volunteers is 8710. Non-volunteers are the individuals who did not receive any VLS reentry programming and were released from prison.<sup>1</sup> However, there are other categories of programming that include certification courses, such as CPR/First Aid that are excluded from the categories described above due to their small-time commitment (e.g., one 1-h class). This led to 256 volunteers being classified as non-volunteers due to not receiving one of the three domains under examination in this study (i.e., cognitive-behavioral, occupational, and educational).

To simplify our analysis for the purposes of this study, we only examined individuals' first incarceration sentence prior to release, which means we did not examine program participation of individuals who were eventually reincarcerated. Therefore, programming delivered after reincarceration is not examined. In regard to missing data, listwise deletion was used to remove cases that contained missing data on the measures described below. A total of 2028 individuals were removed from our sample due to missing or incomplete data on the amount of time served in prison, age, and race/ ethnicity. Some cases contained consecutive admission dates to prison in the data files. These individuals may have been released to detainer, summoned to court, or received some other type of temporary release. These cases were removed in an effort to ensure the sample is comprised of individuals who were released into the community (n = 1574). The remaining cases with missing data represented 454 individuals. Difference of means tests between missing and non-missing cases revealed no differences by age, but that missing cases were more likely to be White volunteers. However, it is important to

note that only 51 cases contained missing data on the race/ethnicity measures out of the entire sample, which represents less than .005% of the data. The final sample size of the study is 7988 individuals with 922 participating in programming and 7066 not participating in programming.

There may be important unmeasured differences between individuals who volunteer in programming in a custodial (prison) setting as compared to a community setting (e.g., a halfway house). Prior research on program volunteerism and initiation in correctional settings by Taylor, Lee, and Taxman (2019) and Vigessaa et al. (2016) also differentiate between locations of program participation. Due to these unmeasured differences, we stratified the sample by volunteers who received programming in prison ( $n = 471$ ) and in the community ( $n = 451$ ) as compared to non-volunteers ( $n = 7066$ ). Ultimately, reentry case management was provided to most releasees but not necessarily containing services related to VLS programming. Finally, we conclude with an examination of individuals who engaged in the most programming while incarcerated as compared to non-volunteers ( $\bar{x} = .40$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ), which is simply an additive measure of the number of times someone engaged in programming while incarcerated or in the community with a range of 0 to 13 different programs.

The measures included in this study are provided in Table 1. Two measures that may influence someone's ability to participate in programming include misconducts or rule violations and time served in prison. We include *pre-programming misconducts* as a measure to capture the number of misconducts (i.e., institutional infractions) an individual has accrued within 120 days of program participation for the volunteer group and 120 days prior to release for the non-volunteer group. On average, we found that most individuals participate in programming within four months prior to release, so we wanted to examine recency of a misconduct as it may influence the ability for individuals to engage in programming. In other words, as to the knowledge of the authors, the presence of non-serious or nonviolent misconducts is not a deciding factor on whether an individual qualifies or is eligible for programming. However, one sanction or punishment associated with misconduct is the loss of privileges and the ability to

participate in programming as decided by NDCS. Therefore, it is important to control for recency of misconduct as it may relate to program participation eligibility, and the lack of controlling for recency would seemingly lead to model misspecification. We also include *time served (in months)* as a predictor to adjust for the opportunity an individual has to participate in programming. The natural log of both pre-programming mis-conducts and time served (in months) is used to adjust for the positive skew of the distributions.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics (program participation). (Table view)

Outcome variable	Programming received in prison					Programming received in community					Range <sup>d</sup>
	Volunteers		Non-volunteers		t/Z <sup>a</sup>	Volunteers		Non-volunteers		t/Z <sup>a</sup>	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)		Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)		
VLS participation	.06	(.24)				.06	(.24)				0–1
Independent variables											
Pre-programming misconducts <sup>b</sup>	.59	(.73)	.55	(.78)	.82	.72	(.81)	.55	(.78)	4.38*	0–4.39
Time served (in months) <sup>b</sup>	3.05	(.91)	2.57	(.96)	10.57*	3.14	(.95)	2.57	(.96)	12.27*	.03–6.32
Age at admission (in years)	32.52	(10.27)	33.59	(11.10)	2.04*	32.66	(10.92)	33.59	(11.10)	-1.73	15–78
Female	.23	(.42)	.14	(.35)	5.33*	.17	(.37)	.14	(.35)	1.46	0–1
Black	.22	(.41)	.22	(.41)	.16	.25	(.43)	.22	(.41)	.95	0–1
Hispanic	.13	(.34)	.12	(.32)	.75	.08	(.28)	.12	(.32)	-2.28*	0–1
Other race/ethnicity	.06	(.24)	.06	(.23)	.64	.06	(.24)	.06	(.23)	.29	0–1
White <sup>c</sup>	.59	(.49)	.61	(.49)	-.94	.61	(.49)	.61	(.49)	.01	0–1
Arrested for property offense	.25	(.43)	.24	(.43)	.41	.29	(.45)	.24	(.43)	2.32*	0–1
Arrested for drug/alcohol offense	.18	(.38)	.22	(.42)	-2.23*	.18	(.39)	.22	(.42)	1.90	0–1
Arrested for other public offense	.20	(.40)	.25	(.43)	-2.30*	.18	(.39)	.25	(.43)	-3.00*	0–1
Arrested for violent offense <sup>c</sup>	.38	(.48)	.27	(.44)	4.90*	.35	(.48)	.27	(.44)	3.44*	0–1
Work assignment termination	.14	(.34)	.12	(.33)	.88	.18	(.39)	.12	(.33)	3.84*	0–1
Urban county	.51	(.50)	.49	(.50)	.73	.53	(.50)	.49	(.50)	1.37	0–1
N =	471		7066			451		7066			

<sup>a</sup> A significant t or Z-statistic illustrates whether differences exist between treatment recipients and treatment non-recipients. Values that exceed  $\pm 1.96$  indicate a significant difference.

<sup>b</sup> These variables are transformed using the natural log.

<sup>c</sup> Indicates reference category.

<sup>d</sup> In an effort to conserve table space, the range includes the min and max values across each of the samples.

Other measures in the multivariable models include *age* (in years), *female*, *race/ethnicity* (*Black non-Hispanic*, *Hispanic*, *other race/ethnicity*, and White non-Hispanic as the reference category), *arresting offense* (*property arrest*, *drug arrest*, *public order arrest*, and violent/sexual offense as the reference category). We also include a dichotomous measure of county of conviction, with urban counties assigned "1." Finally, an important covariate that may predict participation in programming is whether individuals have previously lost a work assignment while incarcerated, which is captured with *work assignment termination*. This dichotomous measure indicates whether the individual has had a work assignment terminated. In addition to predicting program participation in custodial settings, it is possible work termination may also predict program participation in community settings as prior research identifies the importance of understanding the relationship between in prison experiences and post-release behaviors (Cochran, Mears, Bales, & Stewart, 2014). Termination of a prison job may occur because of violation of prison rules or because the individual did not properly perform the duties of the job, and these behaviors may persist into the community that affects program volunteerism and initiation.

### *Analytical strategy*

The analytical strategy for this study proceeds in several stages. First, we examine whether there are differences between volunteers and non-volunteers through difference of means tests. Next, we use multivariable logistic regression to examine the individual characteristics that predict participation in programming while incarcerated and a separate regression predicting participation while in the community. Next, we use negative binomial logistic regression to predict the number of programs that volunteers receive. Negative binomial logistic regression is used because the outcome measure, number of programs, is positively skewed with a considerable number of cases not receiving any programming (i.e., zero programs). We examined individuals' first program participation for the multivariable logistic and multinomial logistic regressions. We then included the total number of programs individuals participated in for the

negative binomial regressions.

## Results

Table 1 reveals that VLS volunteers have served more time in prison ( $\bar{x}$ = 3.05<sub>prison</sub>; 3.14<sub>community</sub>) than non-volunteers ( $\bar{x}$ = 2.57), are younger, and more likely to be female. There is also variation in differences by location of participation (e.g., custody versus community). For instance, volunteers who received programming in prison were less likely to have an arresting offense for drug/alcohol crimes, public order crimes, and more likely to have an arrest for a violent crime. However, volunteers who received programming in the community were more likely to have an arresting offense for property crimes, violent crimes, and less likely to have an arresting offense for public crimes. Finally, volunteers who received programming in the community were more likely to have a work assignment termination than non-volunteers.

The results for the logistic regression analyses predicting participation are included in Table 2. The findings are largely similar across the two analyses with individuals who served more time in prison and who are female having greater odds of participating regardless of being in custody or released to the community. The only difference is that individuals with a work assignment termination are more likely to engage in programming in the community, but this effect is not significant for participation in prison.

**Table 2.** Logistic regression predicting participation into programming. (Table view)

	Programming received in prison			Programming received in community		
	b	(SE)	OR	b	(SE)	OR
Pre-programming misconducts	-.10	(.07)	.91	.12	(.06)	1.13
Time served (in months)	.52***	(.05)	1.68	.60***	(.05)	1.82
Age at admission (in years)	-.01	(.01)	.99	-.01	(.01)	.99
Female	.86***	(.12)	2.37	.38**	(.14)	1.47
Black	.05	(.13)	1.05	.06	(.13)	1.06
Hispanic	.17	(.15)	1.18	-.33	(.18)	.72
Other race/ethnicity	.12	(.20)	1.13	.06	(.21)	1.06
Arrested for property offense	-.02	(.13)	.98	.30*	(.13)	1.35
Arrested for drug/alcohol offense	-.25	(.15)	.78	.08	(.15)	1.09
Arrested for other public offense	-.18	(.14)	.83	-.06	(.15)	.94
Work assignment termination	.01	(.14)	1.01	.27*	(.13)	1.31
Urban county	.02	(.10)	1.02	.02	(.11)	1.02
McFadden's R <sup>2</sup>	.05			.05		

Notes: \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . OR: odds ratio.

The final multivariable analysis examined the characteristics associated with receiving several programs (count outcome; see Table 3). The findings revealed volunteers who received more programming have more time served (IRR = 2.01), are female (IRR = 1.56), Black (IRR = 1.32), and were arrested for a property offense (IRR = 1.52). Individuals convicted in an urban county were less likely to participate in several programs (IRR = .76). Again, the findings pertaining to time served and female appear to be robust across models and program outcomes examined.

**Table 3.** Negative binomial logistic regression predicting number of program participations. (Table view)

	Number of program participations		
	b	(SE)	IRR
Pre-programming misconducts	.13	(.07)	1.14
Time served (in months)	.70***	(.06)	2.01
Age at admission (in years)	-.01	(.01)	.99
Female	.45**	(.14)	1.56
Black	.28*	(.13)	1.32
Hispanic	.17	(.15)	1.18
Other race/ethnicity	.18	(.21)	1.20
Arrested for property offense	.42**	(.13)	1.52
Arrested for drug/alcohol offense	.11	(.14)	1.12
Arrested for other public offense	.04	(.13)	1.04
Work assignment termination	.11	(.14)	1.12
Urban county	-.27**	(.10)	.76

Notes: \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . IRR: incident risk ratio.

## Discussion and conclusion

As jurisdictions seek strategies to reduce recidivism rates, correctional programming has received renewed interest as a partial solution (Gendreau & Smith, 2011). One overlooked component in correctional programming is determining who volunteers and participates in programming. Such an investigation is important as the process of community reentry is marred with obstacles that include obtaining stable employment and housing (Petersilia, 2003). Participation in programming may offer several benefits that include lower recidivism rates and pro-social changes in behavior, but it is important to identify whether there are disparities in who participates in programming (Duwe & McNeeley, 2020; Myers,

2003). The choice to participate in programming is a key component to actualizing one's behavioral trajectory and identity to a pro-social one (Maruna, 2003). Rather than being nudged to change through mandatory assignment, correctional programs that allow individuals to self-select into programming take a more acquiescent approach to client rehabilitation—the merits of which have yet to be extensively examined.

In this study, we examined the correlates of non-clinical program volunteerism and treatment initiation in institutional and community settings in one midwestern jurisdiction. The descriptive findings revealed that volunteers who engage in non-clinical programming are different from non-volunteers in the following ways: more time served in prison, younger, female, less likely to be arrested for a drug/alcohol offense, less likely to be arrested for a public offense, and more likely to be arrested for a violent offense. Those who received non-clinical programming in the community (post-release) were more likely to have the following characteristics as compared to non-volunteers: pre-programming misconducts, more time served, less likely to be Hispanic, more likely to be arrested for a property offense, less likely to be arrested for a public offense, more likely to be arrested for a violent offense, and more likely to have a work assignment termination. Descriptively, these findings indicate that regardless of program setting, volunteers are more likely to have a violent commitment offense and to have more time served in prison. Also, volunteers who received programming in the community have a behavioral history of prison misconduct and a prior work termination while incarcerated compared to non-volunteers. These descriptive findings are at odds with the assumption that individuals with a violent commitment offense would have fewer opportunities to engage in programming due to concerns with institutional safety (Burdon et al., 2002; Chamberlain, 2012). One explanation is that individuals sentenced for a violent offense have to navigate and cope with long-term imprisonment, and part of this coping process may be self-betterment that leads to increases in program volunteerism.

Although a descriptive examination is helpful, it is possible that these differences may not influence program participation once included in a multivariable



model. We estimated a series of multivariable analyses to determine which correlates are related to program volunteerism. These analyses revealed having more time served and being female increased the odds of program participation regardless of program setting (institution and community). Related to policy and practice, the individuals serving more time in prison have more opportunities to receive programming, but it is also important to note that these individuals may be ideal volunteers for programs. These individuals may lack vocational and life skills that will help one obtain employment, and more importantly, stable and meaningful employment. Additionally, these individuals may serve more time in prison due to having more serious commitment offenses. Therefore, the inclusion of time served in the same multivariable model with offense categories may help capture some of the variation in the outcome.

Related to policy, correctional staff and program coordinators may consider promoting the advantages of programming during the intake process in correctional facilities. The goal would be to educate incarcerated individuals about the benefits of prison programming at the onset of the prison sentence, such as the association between vocational programming and post-release employment opportunities. Females may have higher odds of participation in programs during reentry due to the unique challenges that females experience upon release (Petersilia, 2003). These challenges include poverty, societal childcare expectations, and low-paying employment that puts women at higher financial insecurity (Heilbrun et al., 2008; Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012). Mental health concerns are also more prevalent among incarcerated females (James & Glaze, 2006). Therefore, women may simply be more aware of their needs and more willing to take action to address them than men (see Koons-Witt & Crittenden, 2018).

The final multivariable model examined the count of programs that individuals receive. Time served and being female increase the likelihood of engaging in more programs as similar with the previous models, but this analysis also revealed that being Black and having an arrest for a property offense increased the likelihood of engaging in more programs. However, being convicted of a crime in the more

populous counties decreased the number of programs individuals participate in. There are concerns with the disparate treatment of individuals of color while incarcerated, such as the selective enforcement of prison rules (see Flanagan, 1980). The current findings indicate that when controlling for county population density, Black volunteers engage in more programming than White volunteers, providing partial evidence that differential selection is not an issue. Rather, Black participants may anticipate more structural barriers in reentry than their White peers and take more programming to overcome these barriers. Future research should examine perceptions of prison programming through in-depth interviews that shed light on the intersectionality between race, gender, and perceptions of programming. Such a study might identify strategies agencies and programs may adopt to reduce barriers that restrict access to helpful corrections programs. Also, individuals with an arrest for a property offense were found to be more likely to engage in community programming and to take more programming. To contextualize, property crime offenders may simply not have “serious” criminogenic needs that are typically associated with violent offenders.

Our study has limitations that merit discussion. First, we examined one jurisdiction, having a population that is likely considerably different than many others. While our findings are most helpful to the current jurisdiction, the ideographic approach (as compared to a nomothetic approach) we took is one we recommend for each jurisdiction seeking to understand their population better. Second, we only examined individuals’ first incarceration sentence prior to release, which means we did not examine program participation of individuals who were eventually reincarcerated. Thus, it might be the case that programming the second time around is more beneficial, more effective, or more desirable.

Future research should examine dosage of VLS programming in its relation to returns to prison. We also did not examine referral bias, or whether someone who wanted to engage in a program was denied that opportunity. If possible, the extent to which referral bias favors one demographic, risk level, crime committed, or institutional behavior over another should be examined to compliment studies such as ours that examine participation characteristics. Finally, we did not examine

the quality of the programs offered to individuals, and whether such programs achieve their desired goals. Future studies should assess the goals of the program and assign a summary measure of fidelity to program goals as a covariate.

The study of program volunteerism and treatment initiation in corrections received empirical attention as early as the 1970s (Petersilia, 1979). The concerns expressed by Petersilia (1979) remain relevant today, which is correctional systems need to identify “who” needs programming while also aligning that individual with programming opportunities. The identification of individual characteristics that influence program volunteerism is necessary to identify disparities that are responsible for program non-volunteerism and inversely volunteerism. These avenues of research may help ensure underprivileged groups receive programming that ultimately increases equity in our corrections system. Such a goal is important as correctional systems seek “to do more with less” in regard to budget constraints and staffing shortages (Mai & Subramanian, 2017).

### **Note**

1. It is important to note that a non-volunteer is someone who did not participate in any of the VLS programming. We are unable to determine whether these individuals did not need treatment or if they refused to accept treatment.

### **Funding**

This project was funded by the Nebraska Center for Justice Research at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

### **References**

- Austin, J. (2009). The limits of prison based treatment. *Victims & Offenders*, 4(4), 311–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564880903227214>
- Burdon, W. M., Farabee, D., Prendergast, M. L., Messina, N. P., & Cartier, J. (2002). Prison-based therapeutic community substance abuse programs - Implementation and operational issues. *Federal Probation*, 66, 3–8.

- Butler, H. D. (2019). An examination of inmate adjustment stratified by time served in prison. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *64*, 101628–101688.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2019.101628>
- Byrne, J. M. (2020). The effectiveness of prison programming: A review of the research literature examining the impact of federal, state, and local inmate programming on post-release recidivism. *Federal Probation*, *84*(3), 3–20.
- Chamberlain, A. W. (2012). Offender rehabilitation: Examining changes in inmate treatment characteristics, program participation, and institutional behavior. *Justice Quarterly*, *29*(2), 183–228.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2010.549833>
- Clear, T. R. (2007). *Imprisoning communities: How mass incarceration makes disadvantaged neighborhoods worse*. Oxford University Press.
- Cochran, J. C., Mears, D. P., Bales, W. D., & Stewart, E. A. (2014). Does inmate behavior affect post-release offending? Investigating the misconduct-recidivism relationship among youth and adults. *Justice Quarterly*, *31*(6), 1044–1073.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2012.736526>
- Crittenden, C. A., & Koons-Witt, B. A. (2017). Gender and programming: A comparison of program availability and participation in U.S. prisons. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *61*(6), 611–644.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X15601432>
- de Viggiani, N. (2007). Unhealthy prisons: Exploring structural determinants of prison health. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *29*(1), 115–135.
- Duwe, G. (2013). What's inside the “black box”? The importance of “gray box” evaluations for the “what works” movement. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *12*(1), 145–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12012>
- Duwe, G., & Clark, V. (2015). Importance of program integrity: Outcome evaluation of a gender-responsive, cognitive-behavioral program for female offenders. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *14*(2), 301–328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12123>
- Duwe, G., & McNeeley, S. (2020). The effects of prison labor on institutional misconduct, postprison employment, and recidivism. *Corrections*, *5*(2), 89–108.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23774657.2017.1416317>

- Flanagan, T. J. (1980). Time served and institutional misconduct: Patterns of involvement in disciplinary infractions among long-term and short-term inmates. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 8(6), 357–367. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352\(80\)90111-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(80)90111-7)
- Gendreau, P., & Smith, P. (2011). Assessment and treatment strategies for correctional institutions. In J. A. Dvoskin, J. L. Skeem, R. W. Novaco, & K. S. Douglas (Eds.), *Applying social science to reduce violent offending* (pp. 157–178). Oxford University Press.
- Heilbrun, K., Dematteo, D., Fretz, R., Erickson, J., Yasuhara, K., & Anumba, N. (2008). How “specific” are gender-specific rehabilitation needs? An empirical analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(11), 1382–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808323678>
- Jackson, K. L., & Innes, C. A. (2000). Affective predictors of voluntary inmate program participation. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 30 (3/4), 1–20.
- James, D. J., & Glaze, L. E. (2006). *Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Mental health problems of prison and jail inmates*. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Koons-Witt, B., & Crittenden, C. (2018). Gender differences and program participation among prisoners with co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 57(7), 431–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2018.1523818>
- Lee, L. M. (2019). The impact of prison programming on recidivism. *Corrections*, 4(4), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23774657.2017.1399095>
- Long, J. S., Sullivan, C., Wooldredge, J., Pompoco, A., & Lugo, M. (2019). Matching needs to services: Prison treatment program allocations. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 46(5), 674–696. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854818807952>
- Mai, C., & Subramanian, R. (2017). *The price of prisons 2015: Examining state spending trends, 2010–2015*. Vera Institute of Justice.
- Maruna, S. (2003). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*.

- American Psychological Association.
- Maycock, M., McGuckin, K., & Morrison, K. (2020). We are “free range” prison officers’: The experiences of Scottish Prison Service throughcare support officers working in custody and the community. *Probation Journal*, 67(4), 358–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550520954898>
- Morash, M., Haarr, R. N., & Rucker, L. (1994). A comparison of programming for women and men in U.S. prisons in the 1980s. *Crime & Delinquency*, 40(2), 197–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128794040002004>
- Myers, D. L. (2003). The recidivism of violent youths in juvenile and adult court: A consideration of selection bias. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 1(1), 79–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204002238365>
- Office of the Attorney General. (2019). The First Step Act of 2018: Risk and need assessment system. U.S. Department of Justice.
- Petersilia, J. (1979). Which inmates participate in prison treatment programs? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 4(2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.1979.9963621>
- Petersilia, J. (2003). *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. Oxford University Press.
- Petersilia, J. (2011). Beyond the prison bubble. *National Institute of Justice Journal*, 268, 26–31.
- Phelps, M. S. (2011). Rehabilitation in the punitive era: The gap between rhetoric and reality in U.S. prison programs. *Law & Society Review*, 45(1), 33–67.
- Taxman, F. S., & Caudy, M. S. (2015). Risk tells us who, but now what or how: Empirical assessment of the complexity of criminogenic needs to inform correctional programming. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 14(1), 71–103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12116>
- Taylor, L. R., Lee, J., & Taxman, F. S. (2019). Participant and program characteristics: Correlates of substance abuse treatment and participation and prison misconducts. *The Prison Journal*, 99(1), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885518814704>
- Travis, J. (2005). *But they all come back: Facing the challenges of prisoner reentry*.

The Urban Institute Press.

Vigesaa, L. E., Bergseth, K. J., & Jens, K. R. (2016). Who participates in reentry program- ming? An examination of women offenders in a Midwestern state.

*Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 55*(5), 308–328.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2016.1181131>

Wilson, D. B., Gallagher, C. A., & MacKenzie, D. L. (2000). A meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs for adult offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 37*(4), 347–368.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427800037004001>

Wright, E. M., Van Voorhis, P., Salisbury, E. J., & Bauman, A. (2012). Gender-responsive lessons learned and policy implications for women in prison: A review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 39*(12), 1612–1632.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854812451088>