Strength Training In Prisons

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STRENGTH TRAINING TODAY has become accepted by mainstream America more than ever before. In the past, health and fitness professionals believed that cardiovascular conditioning should be the focus of the exercise session and that strength training would cause hypertension, orthopedic injuries, and a decrease in flexibility. Today, society at large is more educated about the myths and misperceptions surrounding strength training. Most men, women, and special populations are more accepting of the positive effects resistance training can provide.

Some experts believe that there is a market for the certified strength and conditioning specialist (CSCS) and NSCA-certified personal trainers (CPT) in the corporate fitness area (5), likewise there may be a market for these professionals in the correctional setting. This article will discuss the controversy over strength training in prisons, the research regarding strength training in prisons, and the role of the strength and conditioning professional in the correctional setting.

■ The Controversy

Unlike the population at large, strength training in prisons has always been popular. In fact, strength training in prisons has developed into a debate between those who believe in the positive effects resistance training may have on the inmates and those who see the negative effects of resistance training in prisons.

There are many benefits strength-training programs may have on inmates that are recognized by The National Correctional Recreation Association (NCRA) (8):

• Weight training privileges can be used as a behavior tool—if an inmate is out of line he will not be able to use the facilities.
• Weight training teaches discipline, record keeping, and goal setting, fills time, reduces boredom, burns off tension, and improves self-esteem.
• Weight training may reduce health costs.
• Weight training can keep a large number of inmates busy at once.
• Inmates require less supervision when participating in constructive open yard recreational activities such as weight training than in many other situations.

• Inmates preparing for a competitive meet will very rarely get involved in prohibited activities because they do not want to lose their lifting privileges.
• Well-conditioned inmates are more employable upon their release.
• Most crime happens during "leisure time." Inmates who fill their leisure time with recreational activities such as weight training, and continue to do so upon their release, are less likely to return.

Despite the many advantages of strength training in correctional institutions there are some disadvantages that need to be considered as well. The NCRA also concedes that (8):

• Inmates could use their size and strength gained from strength training to overpower guards, other inmates, or the public when they are released.
• Larger inmates intimidate guards.
The public does not want their tax dollars to go towards gymnasiums and new weight rooms for felons.

- Weightlifting equipment could be used as a weapon or as a tool to provide means of escape.
- Inmates could be injured while lifting weights that could cost tax dollars to fix.
- There should not be better facilities in prison than in schools.
- Equipment for weightlifting is expensive to purchase and maintain.

With reasonable arguments for both the pros and cons of prison strength-training programs, a controversy exists.

**The Research**

Numerous authors support the research that shows favorable physiological, psychological, and financial impacts as a result of exercise (6, 7, 9–11). The numerous health problems related to physical inactivity and poor lifestyle choices are detrimental to contemporary society, and the same is true for prison inmates as well.

In an original research project that studied the effects of an exercise program that included strength training, statistically significant differences were found between a control inmate group and an experimental inmate group that participated in an exercise and strength-training program funded by the Montana State Prison (3). This particular program that was studied was one that allowed special access for inmates over age 40 to the gymnasium and weight room.

The variables measured included infirmary visits, body weight, skinfold thickness, push-ups, sit-ups, sit and reach, resting systolic blood pressure, and resting diastolic blood pressure. When compared with an age-matched inmate control group, statistically significant differences (p < 0.05) were found in infirmary visits, skinfold measurements, push-ups to exhaustion, 1 minute timed sit-up, and resting heart rate (3). Additionally, a qualitative approach was incorporated into this research project. Inmates were interviewed to determine their subjective perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. The perceptions of the inmates were very positive regarding this special access program. Strength and conditioning specialists understand the physical and psychological effects of strength training on the general population, however, the inmate comments during interviews help shed light on the benefits of strength training as it pertains to this specific population (1). The overwhelming majority of inmates interviewed stated that the exercise and strength-training program was an essential ingredient in developing and maintaining their health because they did not have to compete with younger more aggressive inmates to complete their sessions (as they would have to do during open gym). Also, one of the unique themes that emerged from this study was of strength training for self-defense purposes. One comment in particular summarizes this perspective (1):

“I’m more comfortable and sure of myself. I’m in better shape and I don’t have to worry as much about physical confrontations. I don’t want one, but I’m ready.”

So by quantitative and qualitative measures, this program that allowed for special access for inmates over age 40 to the gymnasium and weight room was deemed effective. Another research project surveyed randomly selected correctional institutions in the western United States. The survey was developed to determine what kind of policies and procedures existed in correctional facilities regarding safe and effective use of the weight room (2).

The results of the survey clearly showed that most correctional facilities (21 of the 25 surveyed) have no policy regarding inmate use of the weight rooms, and therefore do not require practice of safe and effective strength-training techniques and methods. Improperly supervised facilities subject their inmates to higher injury potential and may cause a public tax dollar spending increase.

The majority of the environmental risks associated with the weight room can be effectively controlled. Resistance training that is performed safely is beneficial to almost everyone. It was recommended from this survey that all correctional facilities have qualified supervision, such as the CSCS or the NSCA-CPT, inside correctional strength-training facilities and that the qualified personnel in charge should develop and enforce safe lifting policies (2). Many inmates adapt lifting programs out of magazines that cater to the bodybuilding crowd, recommending 6 day/week split routines. Also, many inmates’ lifting programs are out of balance (numerous sets of bench, numerous sets of curls). These kinds of programs are less likely to be effective and may be injurious, especially for the older inmates.

The research that has been done in the area of correctional strength and conditioning is minimal. However, there is evidence of positive results from programs that allow access to strength-training areas for older inmates. There is still a question as to whether there is a danger factor
for programs that are not supervised and monitored by strength and conditioning specialists.

- **Role of the Strength and Conditioning Professional**

  What are the implications for the strength and conditioning professional? One implication is that those strength and conditioning specialists connected with an institution of higher education may want to look at the possibility of developing partnerships with area correctional facilities. The opportunity is a unique one for both students and faculty. Students participating in these kinds of programs have to develop patience, tact, and diplomacy, and assertiveness in communicating with inmates (4). These are qualities that may benefit any college graduate entering the working world.

  Strength and conditioning specialists and other health and fitness professionals could look into developing partnerships with correctional institutions to promote safe practices. Communicating with prison recreation departments and rehabilitation services is the best place to start. Also, communicating with administrators within the State Department of Corrections about the benefits of these kinds of partnerships and programs, and for funding, will be necessary. A grant proposal will have to be written and presented to these administrators to secure funding for this type of programming. The proposal will have to include expected benefits of the proposed program, or of other similar programs, and the research cited in this article may be of benefit.

  In conclusion, strength training in prisons has been popular far longer than it has been in mainstream society, and necessity versus luxury of weight lifting in prisons is a debated topic. The NCRA concedes that there are 2 sides to this debate, and recent research suggests there are some positive effects of exercise and strength training on older inmates. Also, there are benefits to developing partnerships between correctional institutions and strength and conditioning professionals and institutions of higher education.

- **References**


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