Exploring OT practice in the U.S. criminal justice system: Occupational justice through a jail-based re-entry program

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Introduction/Rationale: Occupational therapy in the U.S. criminal justice system is an emerging practice area. Occupational therapists advocating for occupational justice in incarceration settings offer a shift in perspective regarding correctional policies impacting this marginalized population. Occupational justice applied with this population promotes participation in occupations designed to maximize participation after release from incarceration.

Objectives: 1. Describe Saint Louis University's occupational science and OT Transition to Employment Program within an urban jail in St. Louis, Missouri. 2. Explore collaborative program development and implementation to equip residents with life skills to promote functional community living, obtain employment, and reduce recidivism. 3. Examine the experience of a jail-based OT actively implementing occupational justice programming.

Approach: We performed a review of planning notes and therapist logs to describe the development of this collaborative, pre- and post-release re-entry program. Our OT practitioner used a reflective approach to describe her perspective of practice roles during the first year of program implementation.

Practice Implications: There are many challenges to program implementation when practicing OT in U.S. criminal justice settings. However, the focus on rehabilitation in re-entry programming through the use of meaningful occupation promotes occupational justice and improved quality of life and well-being for incarcerated populations within criminal justice systems.

Conclusion: Saint Louis University's OT-based Transition to Employment Program has implemented a collaborative, interprofessional program within an urban jail. Jail-based occupational therapists in re-entry programming can assist correctional facilities in reducing rates of recidivism and promoting occupational justice.