



Forged In Fire: Rehabilitation on The Fireline

A Mixed Method Analysis of Carceral Firefighting Programs

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Abstract

This research seeks to achieve several goals, mainly to draw attention to a specific and understudied area of corrections—carceral firefighting programs. This study will achieve the above goal through a comparative analysis of carceral firefighting programs from the Western region of the United States, where such programs are most common. The analysis will focus on several key items, including, but not limited to: the number of program participants, level of training, and whether participants live in camps or stay in the prison. Additionally, the study will endeavor to highlight relevant legislation that impacts one’s ability to serve as a firefighter following their term of incarceration; one example is California’s recently passed Assembly Bill 2147 which allows for formerly incarcerated firefighters to use their training to serve in the same capacity upon release. Lastly, this study will highlight any transitional programs, should the state allow formerly incarcerated firefighters to be firefighters after their sentence is over as well as programs that have a framework for success in place, such as Arizona’s Phoenix Crew.

Introduction

Historic wildfires are becoming less historic, and more so a common annual occurrence. Images of burning landscapes, crimson sun, and skies to match are no longer confined to the West Coast, but now often find themselves in our media here in the Midwest. These images do not travel alone to our screens but are often accompanied by smoke from wildfires so massive it is difficult to imagine the scope of their destruction. These wildfires have stressed understaffed forestry and fire services, and with a mounting cost measured both monetarily, and in lives, states have turned to an unlikely population for help. This unlikely population was the focus of this project, and it is that person not often considered a hero often found amidst infernos such as those described above, the incarcerated firefighter. They are largely unrecognized and understudied in academia. Thus, the goal of this work is to build a base of knowledge for future studies, but more importantly highlight a gap in the study of criminal justice, and corrections. Specifically, the goal is to cover the following topics: what carceral firefighting programs are, how they rehabilitate, and the direction this topic of study can be taken in the future.

Where Carceral Firefighters Come From

This study’s geographical focus was the Western United States, as this region is both where the largest proportion of carceral firefighting programs are found, and is most often afflicted by wildfires. The following makes for a large, though incomplete, list of states with carceral firefighting programs:

State	Number of Personnel (Program Participants)
Arizona	240
California	3,700 (900 Fireline Qualified)
Colorado	160
Montana	15
Nevada	152
Oregon	345
Washington	300* (330 during the fire season 270 during the off-season)
Total:	
*Asterisks Denotes Approximation	

(California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CADCR], n.d.; Colorado Correctional Industries [COCI], n.d.; Department of Forestry and Fire Management [DFFM], 2022; The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation [MTDNRC], n.d.; Oregon Department of Forestry [ORDOF], n.d.; State of Nevada Department of Corrections [NVDOC], n.d.; Washington State Department of Corrections [WADOC], n.d.)

California has the largest carceral firefighting program out of all the states included in this study, and likely in the nation. With 3,700 members, 1,600 of whom reside in the state-run Conservation Camps, California has more program participants than the combined total of the six other states listed above. This specific population of incarcerated individuals makes up a relatively small portion of those involved in prison work programs, and an even smaller proportion of the total prison population. Despite the low population, this group can no longer be ignored or relegated to the sidelines as ecological disasters are becoming more common and we are increasingly relying on the labor of the incarcerated to preserve life and property. Further, these firefighting programs offer insight into different ways to approach rehabilitation and views of recidivism, while also challenging scholars and policymakers to review and refine the ethical considerations involved in prison work programs. The ethical considerations here are especially germane when considering the pay range for typical prison work programs, 12¢ - \$1.15 per hour, as compared to the firefighting programs which pay \$2.00 - \$5.00 a day with an additional \$1.45 - \$3.00 an hour when on fire duty (Prison Policy Initiative, 2017). One must also consider

that on top of the pay, there is the allure of getting to leave the prison to be in nature and in the community. There are few programs that can offer participants such pay and freedom, and these benefits are all at the cost of potential serious bodily injury or death.

Literature Review

Central to any prison work program is balancing the rehabilitative function and goals of the program, with the potentially exploitative nature of the program. Nowhere is this balancing act more noticeable or important than carceral firefighting programs, where death or life changing injury are an everyday risk while on job sites. What follows will be a synthesis of available literature on the rehabilitative nature of carceral firefighting programs, as well as their potentially exploitative nature.

Rehabilitation on the Fireline

An important feature of scholarship centered on carceral firefighting programs is the focus on the individual experiences of the inmates, camp staff, and administrative staff. This mode of study allows for insight into micro and macro-level thinking from the individual level all the way to the administrative and policy-making levels. An important step towards understanding the rehabilitative benefits of fire camps is that one must detach themselves from certain preconceived notions of what rehabilitation is. In Philip Goodman's work on the subject he challenges the reader to think not so much about the numbers (i.e., recidivism rates), but focus more on how the individual is experiencing rehabilitation and compare that to how the staff feels the individual is being rehabilitated (Goodman, 2012b). Largely, the view of both the camps' residents and of the staff is that the camp and the overall program are not focused so much on recidivism as an outcome, but rather a side effect. This is to say that the camp is an engine or enabler of change, and therefore makes the individual responsible for their own transformation. This responsabilization of the offender is seen as a focus on moral as opposed to actuarial reform (Goodman, 2012b).

The way in which an individual experiences rehabilitation varies from person to person, and even gender to gender. Among interviewees, a shared theme regarding the process of becoming physically fit emerged. The rehabilitative effects were found in both men and women, though more pronounced in women. The effects likely emerged from the idea that physical fitness and the changing body were a positive enabler of change and physically represented the transformation an individual goes through (Goodman, 2012b). The result is a disciplined hard worker who is both mentally and emotionally stronger as a result of the process of becoming physically fit (Goodman, 2012b).

Much of what is seen in the interviews conducted by Goodman might lead one to believe that responsabilization, the idea that one is the "... arbiter of their own fate..." is the main engine of rehabilitation. Other scholarship adds to the discussion and list of positive rehabilitative factors in fire camps (Goodman, 2012b, p. 450). Among the benefits found in the camps is an

older belief, that hard physical labor builds work ethic. Another benefit is the greater degree of freedom experienced by camp residents. One of the more interesting, and most important factors is found in the work of Lindsey Feldman. Feldman explores the topic of visibility in a carceral setting by focusing on Arizona's State Forestry Crews. Visibility, or being seen, outside the context of the carceral setting (i.e., by the community as opposed to corrections officers, other inmates, or other prison staff) is important. Visibility, for all intents and purposes is defined quite literally, though this definition fails to capture the most important facet and how it relates to furthering the understanding of carceral firefighting programs. Feldman describes prison labor as an "act of disappearance" where one not only physically disappears, behind the large walls and barbed wire fences of the prison, but also individually as one's former identity is replaced with a criminal one, if this has not already occurred (Feldman, 2019 p. 222).

The major rehabilitative factor of the fire camps then, is not simply that the firefighters are seen by the community, but rather how they are seen by the community and how this perceived image affects the individual's looking glass self (Feldman, 2019). Firefighters from different state programs described how it felt to be viewed positively by the community. Being described by some as "Heroes" can lead to conflicting feelings, as one must reconcile being viewed, and in some cases viewing themselves, as both a prisoner and a hero (Feldman, 2019; VanderPyl, 2021). Feldman further outlined two important facets which largely contribute to how one is viewed while in the community. The first is the clothing and equipment carceral firefighters wear and use, and the second is where they are viewed. In Arizona, the firefighters stay in a general prison unless they are out on a job as opposed to the conservation camps of California. The equipment and clothing that the Arizona State Forestry Crews use are non-descript and could be confused with any other Arizona firefighter's equipment or gear (Feldman, 2019). This is important because the lack of carceral symbology means that unless the community members are otherwise told, and in some cases in spite of what they are told when they are in the community working, carceral firefighters are simply viewed as who they are— firefighters, and not as what they have done.

In a recent article by VanderPyl (2021), a similar view is taken to rehabilitation in the camps. Though instead of visibility,—dignity and shame are examined. The ideas of dignity and shame as rehabilitative factors operate as both negatives and positives, just as visibility did in Feldman's work. VanderPyl asserts that one of the more insurmountable barriers to successful reentry has to do with the shame associated with a criminal record (VanderPyl, 2021). The experience of shame makes one begin to believe they are of little worth and impedes the ability for one to be rehabilitated (VanderPyl, 2021). Dignity has much the opposite effect. Increasing one's self-worth means social exclusion is less likely to occur. Allowing one to hold on to their self without replacing it with the criminal self-image improves one's ability to be rehabilitated (VanderPyl, 2021). When discussing the importance of visibility and dignity in one's personal experience of rehabilitation it must be pointed out that one of the most interesting features of the fire camps is the ever-present duality that exists. Incarcerated firefighters exist in a superposition of experiencing both shame and dignity, while being referred to as heroes and criminals simultaneously on job sites (Feldman, 2019; Goodman, 2012a; Goodman, 2012b).

Apart from the rehabilitative nature of the camps and the work itself, camp residents and firefighters staying in traditional walled prisons still have access to the rehabilitative programs one might find in a more conventional carceral settings such as substance abuse programs and reentry programs. Whether that type of programming should act as a model for rehabilitative incarceration going forward is unclear, and more research will need to be conducted before a more definitive answer can be given. Though the general consensus of prisoners and staff seems to be that while camps aid in rehabilitation, they are not without faults and most certainly are not free from claims of exploitation (Goodman, 2012a, Goodman, 2012b).

Exploitation: Service at a Cost

There is no lack of discussion when it comes to prison labor, whether it is warranted and useful, or if it is a step too far and exploitative. Few prison work programs are more appropriate for this discussion than carceral firefighting programs. Participants are regularly exposed to life threatening situations for mere dollars a day (Goodman, 2012a, Goodman, 2012b). A central feature of the argument about exploitation is the pay. Prison firefighters and regular firefighters both agree that the pay is inadequate compared to the work and the risk, while detractors argue that if the inmates were paid something close to minimum wage, then one might have the incentive to go to prison for the pay, meals, housing, and healthcare (Goodman, 2012a). Furthermore, a sentiment shared by staff and some prisoners, is that because they have committed a crime they are not deserving of greater pay (Goodman, 2012a). However, not all claims of exploitation relate to pay, with some focusing on the inmate-staff relationship. Inmates feel that many of their grievances were ignored or purposefully lost in the bureaucratic red tape. Not only this, but some felt that the better conditions and high demand for placement in the camps empowered staff to threaten camp residents with removal from the camp and placement back in the much less desirable walled prison, playing on the idea that there are countless others waiting to take your place if you don't want it (VanderPyl, 2021, Goodman, 2012a). Interestingly, as was seen when discussing rehabilitation, among inmates another duality emerges. Many incarcerated firefighters find their work to be both exploitative and useful at the same time, a theme seen across multiple states' programs (Feldman, 2019; Goodman, 2012a p. 361; VanderPyl, 2021).

Findings

The program characteristics compared in this study included the following: number of personnel; whether individuals were housed in the prison or in a camp; the level of training they received and or certification level if applicable; whether the clothing and equipment labeled the individual wearer or operator as an incarcerated individual; and lastly whether or not the state had a transitional program, or allowed the individual to seek employment as a firefighter post-release. These measures were chosen because they are central to the concept of visibility, shame, and dignity as described above. Additionally, it is important to know whether the state offers transitional programs or even allows former program members to be firefighters when

considering how meaningful employment impacts post-release outcomes, such as recidivism.

Housing: Prison or Camp

When looking at where firefighters were being housed we found that the majority were housed in the traditional prison and would leave from there to go out on jobs. The only three states that have dedicated camps are: California, Nevada, and Oregon. When considering the topic of where individuals are being housed, it is important to remember that if a state has dedicated camps, it does not necessarily mean that all program participants will be housed in such a facility. As seen above with California, less than half of all program members actually reside in the camps, while the rest stay in a traditional prison.

Training

When it comes to standards for training and certification levels, states may set their own requirements. However, many still defer to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), as the unofficial leader in Wildfire firefighting. Accordingly, when determining what level of training their incarcerated firefighters should receive, many states will require their firefighters meet the NWCG standard, or will have heavily structured their training around the NWCG training. Even still, no nationally recognized standard of training exists for incarcerated firefighters.

State	Level of Training or Certification
Arizona	NWCG Type I & II
California	FFT
Colorado	NWCG Red-Card
Montana	NWCG Type II
Nevada	NWCG FFBT S130-S190
Oregon	Receive training, not specified.
Washington	NWCG Type II

(CADCR, n.d.; COCI, n.d.; DFFM, 2022; MTDNRC, n.d.; ORDOF, n.d.; NVDOC, n.d.; WADOC, n.d.)

Training or Certification	Description
NWCG Type I "Squad Boss"	Leads small groups ≤ 7 and is responsible for their safety on wildland and prescribed fire incidents. Supervises resources at Type II level and reports to a Crew Boss or Specialty Boss.
NWCG Type II "Crew Member"	Performs fire suppression and fuels management duties in the most adverse climate, fuel, and terrain conditions. No supervisory responsibilities and is supervised by Type I.
NWCG Red-Card "Incident Qualification Card"	Interagency certification that is position dependent. Is issued upon completion of position specific training, and passing the positions required fitness test. Fitness tests vary depending upon if the position is: Arduous, Moderate, or Light.
FFT	Similar to Type I or II above depending on if an individual is an FFT-I or FFT-II. For the purpose of Conservation Camp participants must pass a physical fitness test to move into 1 week of classroom instruction followed by 1 week of field exercises.
NWCG FFBT S130-S190	S-190 is introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior and consists of 7 instructor-led training hours and 6-8 self-directed hours and must be completed prior to starting S-130. S-130 is the Firefighting Training Course and consists of 29 instructor led training hours with 8-12 hours of field exercises.

(National Wildfire Coordinating Group, 2021; California Governor's Office of Emergency Services: Fire Rescue et al., 2014)

Gear and Clothing: Labeled or Non-Descript

Regarding the gear these firefighters use, and the clothes they wear, only two states (California and Nevada) opt to have their firefighters clearly labeled as being incarcerated. The other states are more non-descript. This raises the question of how the rehabilitative experience varies from state to state, when considering how labeling affects the individual's experience in the program, and reception by community members.

Legislative Pathways to Employment & Transitional Programs

For many people participating in the myriad carceral firefighting programs, the end of their sentence typically means the end of their career as a firefighter. Why do those states that are both in need of firefighters, and who trained individuals in the very job they are in need of people for, might refuse to hire former program members. Further, firefighting provides meaningful employment whereby the individual goes to work knowing what they do makes a difference

in the lives of their fellow community members, especially when they save life or property. Accordingly, it can be argued that such employment acts as a protective factor against future criminal behavior. While three of the seven states have pathways to employment as firefighters, only two of the states in this study outline what these pathways are; California, and Arizona. In September 2020, California passed Assembly Bill 2147. This bill opens a pathway for former Conservation Camp program members to become firefighters outside of prison via the expungement of their criminal record. Much like the program itself, this expungement is only available for individuals who meet certain criteria. The Assembly Bill lays out this criteria in § II 1203.4b(a)(1):

- (A) Murder.
- (B) Kidnapping.
- (C) Rape as defined in paragraph (2) or (6) of subdivision (a) of Section 261 or paragraph (1) or (4) of subdivision (a) of Section 262.
- (D) Lewd acts on a child under 14 years of age, as defined in § 288.
- (E) Any felony punishable by death or imprisonment in the state prison for life.
- (F) Any sex offense requiring registration pursuant § 290.
- (G) Escape from a secure perimeter within the previous 10 years.
- (H) Arson.

In Arizona a similar step was taken in the form of the Phoenix Crew, a Type II Hand Crew consisting almost entirely of low risk offenders. This crew, founded in 2017, only consists of 20 members. However, it illustrates a concept that if brought to scale could offer an incredible opportunity at a “second chance” for many former program members. Moreover, the Phoenix Crew can set an example for other states to follow and expand upon.

Conclusion & Future Studies

The goal of the present study was largely to bring attention to an area of corrections which receives little of it. There are several directions that future studies may take this topic, and how they might affect change in this correctional practice. While it may, at the individual level, be more important to look at how the individual experienced rehabilitation regardless of post-release criminal activity, the truth of the matter is that in order to “sell” the idea of carceral firefighting programs, more traditional metrics will need to be explored. Thus the following relationships, or intersections, need to be explored: I.) What is the relationship between program participation and recidivism? II.) What is the relationship between program participation and employment? III.) What effect, if any, does program participation and employment have on recidivism? IV.) What is the outcome for those individuals who participated in the program, and successfully leveraged AB 2147, to gain employment as a firefighter post-release? Similarly, what of those who gained employment in the Phoenix Crew? V.) What effect does labeling play on the program participants’ overall rehabilitative experience, and does labeling create noticeably different effects post-release when compared to programs that do not label? VI.) Interstate and even intrastate transfers of prisoners are not uncommon, is this a practice that also takes place within carceral firefighting programs during the fire season? What about out of season?

The answers to these questions, taken with the findings from studies focusing on individual experiences, can help define carceral firefighting programs' place in the world of prison work and rehabilitative programs.

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