Assessing the Service Quality of Prison Education in Cambodia: A Case Study of the 1st Correctional Center

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Article Info	ABSTRACT

Prison education plays a crucial role in rehabilitation, yet its service quality remains underexplored, particularly in Cambodia. This study examines the quality of prison education at the 1st Correctional Center, addressing a key research gap by evaluating prisoners' expectations versus their actual perceptions of educational services. The objective is to assess whether current programs meet rehabilitative goals and identify barriers to effective education delivery. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative surveys and statistical analysis with qualitative interviews to evaluate service quality comprehensively. A paired t-test analysis (t = 8.95, p < 0.001) revealed that prisoners rated education services higher than expected. However, limited resources, overcrowding, inconsistent policies, and a shortage of qualified educators still hinder effectiveness. Qualitative results further highlight institutional barriers, including security restrictions limiting prisoner participation and the lack of standardized curricula across facilities. Additionally, while education is recognized as a rehabilitative tool, its role in clemency decisions and sentence reductions remains ambiguous, underscoring the need for policy enhancements. These findings contribute to ongoing prison reform efforts, highlighting the importance of inter-agency collaboration, digital learning expansion, and integrating education into legal reintegration frameworks. By addressing structural challenges and aligning prison education with global best practices, Cambodia can strengthen its correctional education system, ultimately improving prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prison education is widely recognized as a crucial tool for rehabilitation, equipping incarcerated individuals with the skills necessary for reintegration into society. Studies have shown that access to quality education within correctional facilities can reduce recidivism, improve post-release employment opportunities, and foster personal

development [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. International models, such as those implemented in Norway, Germany, and Denmark, have demonstrated that structured prison education programs contribute to lower reoffending rates and increased social reintegration success [6], [7], [8]. However, despite the well-documented benefits, the quality of educational services in correctional institutions remains an underexplored area of research, particularly in Cambodia. This study seeks to assess the service quality of prison education at the 1st Correctional Center, focusing on prisoners' expectations versus their actual experiences and identifying key challenges and opportunities for policy improvements.

Although Cambodia has tried to introduce prison education through government and NGO-led initiatives, challenges such as overcrowding, limited resources, inconsistent curricula, and a shortage of trained educators persist [9]. While previous studies on Cambodian correctional education have primarily focused on program availability and policy frameworks, few have examined the actual quality of these services from the prisoners' perspective [10], [11], [12], [13]. Additionally, limited research on how education is linked to clemency decisions, such as pardons and sentence reductions, plays a significant role in rehabilitation. This research aims to fill that gap by evaluating whether current prison education programs meet rehabilitative goals and how they align with international standards.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative surveys, statistical analysis (paired t-test), and qualitative interviews to evaluate service quality in correctional education comprehensively. By examining prisoners' expectations, perceptions, and institutional barriers, the study contributes to ongoing prison reform discussions and offers policy recommendations for improving educational access, integrating digital learning, and strengthening the role of education in legal reintegration frameworks. The 1st Correctional Center was selected as a case study due to its diverse prisoner population as the largest prison in Cambodia, structured educational programs, and role in pilot rehabilitation initiatives. By assessing the gaps between service delivery and prisoners' satisfaction, this research provides data-driven insights for improving correctional education policies and aligning them with international standards. The findings from this study will contribute to prison reform discussions in Cambodia and inform policymakers on the best ways to enhance the quality of educational services in correctional settings.

1.1. Service quality

George N. Kenyon and Kabir C. Sen defined service quality as the organization's capability to reach clients' expectations [14]. It is determined by the differences between clients' expectations of the service provider's performance and their expectations and motivations at the time of service. Since services are intangible, management cannot verify quality directly, so managing client expectations across different phases of service interaction is crucial. Brysland and Curry specified that service quality is about providing something intangible in a way that is both pleasing and giving value to the clients [15]. If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory, and hence, the client's dissatisfaction occurs [14], [15], [16]. In this study, service quality is

the effectiveness of prison education in the first correctional center to deliver the prison education program to the prisoner in a way that truly meets their expectations.

1.2. SERVQUAL

As service quality measures how well an organization performs its services compared to its customers' expectations, clients engage the services in response to needs [4]. They have standards and expectations, whether consciously or unconsciously, for how well a service delivery will perform to satisfy those needs.

The "theory of service quality," often referred to as the SERVQUAL model, posits that service quality is determined by a client's perception of how well a service meets their expectations across five key dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy; essentially, it is the difference between what a client expects from a service and what they receive, with higher quality achieved when expectations are met or exceeded. The SERVQUAL model is a service quality framework developed in 1992 by Parasuraman et al. [17] for clients to evaluate the quality of a service. It consists of 5 dimensions and 22 items for accessing the client's perception.

1.3.   Education in Prison Setting.

Prison education in prison settings refers to educational programs provided to prisoners to help them complete basic qualifications to improve their chances of further education, employment, and successful reintegration into society post-release [18]. These programs focus on the prisoners' basic and advanced learning needs. Furthermore, prison education plays a crucial role in rehabilitating prisoners, providing them with enhanced opportunities for employment and social stability upon their reintegration into society [19]. Literacy instruction, life skills training, vocational studies, and moral instruction are some programs that aim to lessen recidivism rates and improve post-release prospects [20], [21]. However, the success of such initiatives also largely depends upon government policy, budgetary distribution, and correctional facilities' commitment to embedding education within overall rehabilitation [22].

Despite its benefits, implementing education programs in prison also faces many significant challenges. Many studies show that the common issue is that prisons lack proper classrooms, teaching materials, and digital learning resources, which hinders the effectiveness of educational programs [8], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27]. In addition, concerns with prison security and institutional restrictions also present clear challenges, as tough prison policies often limit access for certain categories of prisoners [28]. The solution in these areas will require a great deal of collaboration between correctional facilities, the government, and non-governmental organizations in a joint effort to improve access and enhance the quality of learning in prisons.

Corrections education is also an after-product of prison motivation and participation [29]. Most prisoners encounter psychological and emotional barriers that affect their readiness to enroll in educational courses. Low self-esteem, history of no prior formal education, and fear of life upon release discourage prisoners from utilizing learning resources. Society and culture's stigmatization of released offenders also creates

reintegration challenges, and hence, educational programs that encompass academic as well as social reintegration skills are necessary [30]. By strengthening prison education and connecting it with job access and support systems, prison systems can be rehabilitative in eliminating recidivism and encouraging rehabilitation [31].

In Cambodia's justice system, the prison law that governs the correctional facilities and its prisoners was adopted in 2011. This law has provided the full authority to the Directorate General of Prisons (DGP) of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to be responsible for managing all prisons and correctional facilities [32]. In Article 66 of the prison law, convicted prisoners shall be assigned to participate in legal education and social-moral education programs organized by each prison [32]. On the other hand, article 67 states that convicted prisoners shall be provided with all means to access general education and vocational training programs. These programs shall be integrated with the national education and vocational training systems.

Furthermore, Special attention shall be paid to the particular needs of juvenile convicted prisoners for education, vocational training, rehabilitation, and reintegration in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. This article also called for the cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training to cooperate with the Ministry of Interior to develop and implement education and vocational training programs for convicted prisoners. By 2024, education in prison will be divided into two types: formal education as a general education program and other is non-formal education as a rehabilitation program [9]. The formal education includes a literacy program, library program, NomadLab program, internal regulations program, drug education program, and social-moral education program. The non-form education included a Basic Education Equivalency Program (BEEP), a life skill program, a foreign language program, and a pre-reintegration education program. These various educational programs aligned with the government's broader strategy to improve rehabilitation outcomes and reduce recidivism. However, access to education within Cambodian prisons remains inconsistent due to resource limitations, overcrowding, and institutional constraints [33].

2.   METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the service quality of prison education at the 1st Correctional Center. The combination of survey-based quantitative analysis and qualitative interviews allows for a comprehensive understanding of how prisoners perceive the quality of educational services and how these perceptions align with institutional challenges and policy implications. The quantitative data was collected through structured surveys and analyzed using a paired t-test, while the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure that the selected participants represented a diverse cross-section of the prison population. A total of 170 prisoners and five prison officers participated in the study. The 170 prisoners were selected

based on their participation in educational programs, sentence duration, and security classification. Ensuring a balanced representation of different learning experiences, including 5 officers, was critical to gaining administrative insights into the challenges of delivering education in a correctional setting. The sample size was determined based on feasibility, access to participants, and the need for statistically meaningful comparisons in the paired t-test.

The quantitative component involved administering structured surveys to prisoners, assessing their expectations and actual perceptions of education services. The paired t-test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between these two variables, helping to quantify gaps in service quality. This statistical method was chosen because it is appropriate for comparing related samples, making it suitable for evaluating prisoners' preconceived expectations versus real experiences with educational programs.

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 20 prisoners and five officers to explore the perceived strengths and challenges of the prison education system. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes, such as barriers to education, effectiveness of teaching methods, and institutional limitations. These qualitative insights provided context to the quantitative findings, explaining why certain gaps in service quality exist. By integrating both methods, this study ensures that numerical findings are complemented by in-depth narratives, creating a holistic analysis of correctional education service quality.

The survey instrument was pre-tested on a small sample of prisoners to confirm clarity and consistency in responses and ensure reliability. Thematic analysis followed inter-coder reliability checks, where the researcher reviewed transcripts to ensure consistent interpretation of qualitative data. In terms of validity, the study employed triangulation, cross-verifying findings from survey responses, interviews, and institutional reports to enhance the credibility of the results. Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process to encourage honest and unbiased participant responses. In addition, to ensure that the responses from prisoners were honest and genuine, the researcher conducted the interviews and distributed the questionnaires to prisoners and prison officers at different times. This approach minimized potential influence or pressure from prison authorities, allowing the prisoners to express their views more freely and ensuring the authenticity of their responses.

By integrating statistical analysis with qualitative insights, this study provides a data-driven yet contextually rich evaluation of prison education service quality, contributing to evidence-based recommendations for improving correctional education policies in Cambodia.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Service Quality of Prison Education

This section presents the study's findings by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively assess service quality in prison education at the 1st Correctional Center (see Table 1). The results indicate that prisoners generally perceived the quality of

education services to be higher than they initially expected, which was further explored through qualitative interviews.

Table 1. Paired Differences

	x	SD	SD Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the difference		t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Overall Perceptions-Overall Expectation	.47	.68	.05	.36	.57	8.95	169	.000

The research results indicate a significant difference between overall perceptions and expectations regarding prison education service quality at the 1st Correctional Center. The mean difference of 0.47 suggests that, on average, prisoners' perceptions of the education services differ from their initial expectations. Since this difference is positive, it shows that prisoners perceive the quality of education as better than they initially expected.

On the other hand, the standard deviation (SD = 0.68) reflects the variability in the differences between perceptions and expectations among participants. The standard error of the mean (0.05) is relatively small, indicating a precise estimate of the mean difference. The 95% confidence interval (0.36 to 0.57) confirms that the difference is unlikely due to chance, as the interval does not include zero. This further strengthens the result that prisoners' perceptions are consistently higher than their expectations across the sample.

The t-statistic (t = 8.95, df = 169) is large, reinforcing the significance of this difference. The p-value (0.000) is well below the standard threshold of 0.05, indicating strong statistical evidence that prisoners' perceptions of education services differ significantly from their expectations. This suggests that the educational programs provided at the 1st Correctional Center may have exceeded initial expectations, possibly due to better-than-anticipated teaching quality, curriculum relevance, or accessibility of learning materials.

The overall results show that prisoners perceive the education services more positively than expected. Additionally, policymakers and prison officers should assess whether this positive perception is consistent across different subgroups of prisoners and whether any service delivery areas still require improvement. Insights from qualitative interviews with prison officers will provide further context on the implementation and effectiveness of these educational programs.

3.1.1. Comparing Expectations and Perceptions

While the results indicate that prisoners found their learning experience more structured, engaging, or beneficial than anticipated, several factors may contribute to this positive perception. First, access to learning resources exceeded expectations, with prisoners reporting better-than-expected availability of textbooks, vocational training tools, and library facilities. Second, many prisoners expected poor instruction but were surprised by the structure and engagement provided by educators, including both trained teachers and prison officers. Third, a peer learning environment contributed to increased

motivation, as prisoners found learning alongside others to be a source of encouragement and support. Finally, the vocational relevance of the courses, particularly in areas such as carpentry and agriculture, was recognized as useful for post-release employment, which positively influenced prisoners' perceptions.

These findings align with studies conducted in other correctional systems, where prisoners initially held low expectations for educational programs but later valued the structured learning opportunities. Research in Thailand and Norway similarly found that prisoners often underestimated the quality of prison education until they actively participated in the programs [34], [35]. The results suggest that even within a resource-constrained environment, structured education programs can exceed prisoner expectations when they are well-organized, relevant, and accessible.

3.1.2. Insights From Prisoners and Prison Officers

To complement the statistical analysis, qualitative interviews were conducted with prisoners and prison officers to explore the reasons behind the higher-than-expected satisfaction with prison education. Three key themes emerged from these discussions: positive learning experiences, resource availability, and barriers to participation due to security restrictions.

Many prisoners reported that the quality of teaching was better than they had expected, contributing to their higher perception of education services. One prisoner shared, "I thought the classes would just be lectures with no real benefit, but the teacher explained things in a way that made sense. I never finished school, but now I feel like I am learning something useful." Similarly, a prison officer noted, "At first, many prisoners were hesitant to join, but once they saw the structure and the way lessons were taught, they became more involved." This suggests that instructor engagement and structured lesson delivery played a crucial role in shaping prisoners' perceptions.

Another contributing factor was the availability of learning materials, which exceeded initial expectations. Despite concerns about limited funding and overcrowding, some prisoners expressed surprise at the accessibility of books, vocational training tools, and digital learning platforms. One prisoner commented, "I did not think we would have access to real learning materials, but the library is better than I expected, and the vocational training has actual tools we can use." However, this was not consistent across all programs. As another prisoner pointed out, "We need more updated materials. Some books are old, and not all subjects are available." This indicates that while some aspects of resource allocation were positively received, gaps remain in the availability of updated learning materials.

Despite the positive perceptions, institutional security policies still hindered full access to educational programs for certain prisoners. Some prisoners, particularly those classified as high-security risks, faced movement restrictions that prevented them from attending classes. A prison officer explained, "Some prisoners are not allowed to leave their designated areas due to security concerns, which means they miss out on classes." Additionally, frequent prison transfers disrupted prisoner learning progress, as education programs were not standardized across different correctional facilities. One prisoner, who

had been transferred mid-course, described the impact: "I was doing well in my literacy class, but after I was transferred, there was no similar program in the new prison, so I had to stop." This highlights the need for a standardized prison education framework that allows prisoners to continue their studies despite facility transfers.

3.2. The Challenges of Prison Education

From the in-depth interviews with prison officers from the 1st Correctional Center, four main challenges were identified as the root cause of the issue with the implementation of the prison education program. These were (1) limited resources and infrastructure, (2) security and institutional restrictions, (3) lack of qualified educators, and (4) prisoner motivation and learning barriers.

3.2.1. Limited Resources and Infrastructure

A major barrier to effective correctional education is insufficient funding, directly affecting the availability of learning materials, classroom space, and technological resources. Many Cambodian prisons operate in overcrowded conditions, making it difficult to allocate dedicated learning spaces for educational programs. One prisoner expressed frustration over this issue, stating, "Sometimes we are eager to learn, but the classroom is too crowded, and there are not enough books for everyone." Similarly, a prison officer acknowledged, "Budget constraints mean that we cannot provide updated materials or expand vocational training to match job market needs." These limitations significantly affect prisoner engagement and learning outcomes, as prisoners often struggle to access necessary educational tools.

Furthermore, digital learning remains underdeveloped despite efforts to introduce e-learning programs like NomadLab. Many prisoners have limited exposure to technology, making it difficult to integrate digital platforms into prison education. Without proper infrastructure and consistent funding, the potential for education to contribute to rehabilitation remains unfulfilled.

3.2.2. Security and Institutional Restrictions

Strict prison security policies often conflict with educational access, particularly for high-risk prisoners. According to Cambodia's Prison Law [32], certain prisoners classified as high-security risks or facing disciplinary action may have restricted movement within the facility, including limited participation in rehabilitation programs. One officer explained, "Some prisoners are not allowed to leave their designated areas due to security concerns, which means they miss out on classes." This policy, while ensuring order, unintentionally excludes a portion of the prison population from educational opportunities, contradicting the rehabilitative goals of prison education.

Additionally, frequent prison transfers disrupt prisoner learning progress, as educational programs are not standardized across facilities. A prisoner who had been transferred mid-course shared, "I was doing well in my literacy class, but when I moved to a different prison, there was no similar program, and I had to stop." Without a nationwide credit transfer system for prison education, prisoners face disruptions that prevent them

from completing their coursework, limiting the long-term benefits of correctional education.

3.2.3. Lack of Qualified Educators

A significant challenge in Cambodian correctional education is the shortage of trained educators teaching in prison environments. Many correctional facilities rely on prison officers or volunteers to deliver education programs, but few have formal teaching qualifications. A prison officer admitted, "We do our best to teach literacy classes, but most are not trained educators. Sometimes, we lack proper teaching materials to keep them engaged." This lack of expertise reduces instructional quality and creates inconsistencies in delivering lessons.

Furthermore, low salaries and difficult working conditions deter many professional educators from working in prisons. Unlike traditional schools, correctional educators must navigate security constraints, behavioral challenges, and administrative barriers requiring specialized training [36]. Attracting and retaining qualified instructors for prison education programs remains difficult without incentives such as competitive salaries, professional development opportunities, and structured teaching frameworks.

3.2.4. Prisoner Motivation and Learning Barriers

Prisoner motivation plays a crucial role in the success of correctional education programs. Many prisoners enter the system with negative past experiences in education, low self-esteem, or cognitive difficulties, making it challenging to engage them in learning. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [37], individuals require autonomy, competence, and relatedness to develop intrinsic motivation for learning. However, prison conditions often undermine these factors, leading to low participation rates in education programs.

One prisoner reflected on his struggles, saying, "I never finished school before coming here. I always felt like I was not smart enough, so I was afraid to join any classes." This highlights how prior educational trauma and self-doubt create psychological barriers to learning. Additionally, some prisoners lack clear incentives to participate in education, as academic achievements are not formally linked to sentence reductions or parole eligibility. When asked, a prison officer confirmed, "If there was a clear connection between education and parole decisions, I think more prisoners would take classes seriously." This suggests that linking educational success to reintegration benefits could improve prisoner engagement and long-term commitment to learning.

4.   RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, several key points should be implemented to improve the quality and effectiveness of prison education in Cambodia to enable them to function well and play a critical part in reform, particularly prison education delivery. The following recommendations provide practical strategies to enhance prison education and ensure it contributes meaningfully to rehabilitation and reintegration.

4.1. Increase Funding and Infrastructure Development

In order to address the issue of limited resources and infrastructure, additional government investment is needed to expand educational facilities in correctional centers and prisons. This includes building new classrooms, providing updated textbooks, and furnishing prisons with digital learning systems that accommodate more students without additional physical space needs. By investing more funds into prison education, the government can provide all prisoners with better-quality learning materials and structured learning programs.

In addition, implementing e-learning and distance education programs could significantly enhance prison education access and effectiveness. Since prisons routinely suffer from shortages of resources and logistical constraints, online education programs, such as web-based courses and video lessons, could help to bridge those gaps. Moreover, collaborations with public universities and NGOs could help develop prison education curricula to prepare prisoners for market-demand training. Investment in improved infrastructure will promote improved learning conditions and aid prisoners in gaining practical skills, enhancing their rehabilitation chances once released.

4.2. Reform Security and Institutional Policies

As strict security policies might conflict with educational purposes, one of the proposed solutions is to implement in-cell learning programs for prisoners, wherein learning material, audio lessons, or tablets with learning content can be sent to the prisoners without compromising security. Because rigorous security policy can conflict with education objectives, among the resolutions that have been proposed is the implementation of in-cell learning programs for the prisoners, where study material, audio tutorials, or tablets with study materials can be communicated to the prisoners without encumbrance security.

Furthermore, because routine prison transfers can disrupt prisoners' education achievement, the government has to normalize prison education courses in different prisons. Establishing a nationally recognized prison education system with transferable course credits would ensure prisoner's continuity of education. In addition, improved coordination between corrections and education institutions would facilitate the creation of a coherent and sequential learning pathway for prisoners transferring between different prisons.

4.3. Enhance Teacher Training and Professional Development

Unlike traditional schools, prison education requires specialized teaching strategies, as prisoners often have diverse learning needs, histories of trauma, and low literacy levels. Many prison education programs currently rely on untrained volunteers or officers who may lack the skills and expertise. A structured teacher training program should be developed to equip them with the skills needed to support prisoner learning effectively if a more qualified educator cannot be hired.

Additionally, attracting and retaining qualified teachers in prisons is challenging due to low salaries, limited career advancement opportunities, and security concerns.

Offering incentives such as higher salaries, professional development courses, and recognition programs could encourage more educators to work in correctional settings. Establishing partnerships with universities and teacher training institutions would further strengthen the quality of instruction in prisons, ensuring that prisoners receive a standard of education comparable to mainstream schools and will ultimately improve educational outcomes and rehabilitation prospects for prisoners.

4.4. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation

An effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system must be implemented to guarantee that prison education programs are of high quality and yield the desired outcomes. There is nothing in terms of prisoner education outcomes, making it difficult to establish program effectiveness or improvement points. Integrating continuous M&E via feedback surveys, teacher reports, and recidivism tracking would help quantify education programs' impact on rehabilitation and reintegration. Additionally, establishing a national database of prison education that tracks program attendance, learning gains, and post-release employment rates would allow evidence-based policy reform to make prison education more effective.

5. CONCLUSION

This study assessed the service quality of prison education at the 1st Correctional Center in Cambodia, focusing on prisoners' expectations versus their actual experiences with educational services. The findings indicate that while inmates generally rated education services higher than expected, significant challenges remain, including limited resources, overcrowding, inconsistent policies, and a shortage of qualified educators. Additionally, while education is recognized as a rehabilitative tool, its role in clemency decisions and sentence reductions remains ambiguous, underscoring the need for policy enhancements to integrate educational progress into legal reintegration frameworks explicitly.

The implications of this research extend to policy development, correctional management, and rehabilitation strategies. By strengthening inter-agency collaboration, expanding digital learning initiatives, and improving teacher training, prison education programs can be made more accessible and effective. Furthermore, aligning prison education with global best practices will reduce recidivism and enhance post-release reintegration outcomes. Policymakers should consider formalizing education as a key component of parole and sentence reduction decisions, incentivizing greater inmate participation.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The findings are based on a single correctional center, which may not fully represent the service quality of prison education across Cambodia. Additionally, security restrictions and institutional barriers limited the extent of prisoner participation in the research. Future studies should adopt a broader, multi-site analysis to compare educational service quality across different prison facilities and explore the long-term impact of correctional education on employment opportunities and recidivism rates. Comparative studies with other Southeast Asian prison

systems could provide valuable insights into best practices that can be adapted to Cambodia. Additionally, research should investigate gender-specific educational needs within correctional institutions, ensuring that women prisoners receive tailored learning opportunities that address their unique rehabilitation challenges.

Ultimately, improving correctional education policies and implementation will not only benefit incarcerated individuals but also contribute to a safer, more rehabilitative, and socially just correctional system. By prioritizing education as a core element of rehabilitation, Cambodia can strengthen its commitment to reducing recidivism and fostering successful reintegration for former inmates.

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