

Faced with limited choices, prisoners become entrepreneurs to meet their needs

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Inside Gramercy maximum security prison, the market for nearly any kind of good or service is extremely limited, to say the least. But according to a new study in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, the severely restricted consumption choices faced by the 3,000 or so inmates at Gramercy create opportunities to pursue innovative and entrepreneurial business ventures.

"The men at Gramercy quickly come to understand that the formal system of exchange, from public provision of goods and services to the commissary, is primarily responsive to needs of third parties such as guards, politicians, voters, and suppliers. The needs and desires of the incarcerated men themselves are often neglected, and so the prisoners themselves take entrepreneurial steps to meet them," write the authors Ronald Paul Hill (Villanova Business School), Justine Rapp (University of San Diego), and Michael L. Capella (Villanova Business School).

The study was conducted over eighteen months. Thirty-five inmates recorded their own impressions and interviewed 350 of their fellow prisoners about the reality of living under conditions of restricted consumption. The inmate-researchers were serving life sentences with no chance of parole, often for murder, and had been in [prison](#) since their teenage years. The personal reflections and interviews resulted in an audio transcript of approximately 750 pages.

As the data collected from the research shows, the effects of restricted consumption at Gramercy reveal themselves in several ways. Some of

those effects are negative, such as when inmates succumb to the intensity of their surroundings by using drugs, alcohol, and junk food as a form of self-medication. But others are positive. The conditions of restricted consumption lead some of the men to take on leadership roles that mirror their previous street lives to develop illicit marketing systems for such services as haircutting and basic medical care.

The authors argue that legislators and the general public should meet prisoners such as those at Gramercy in order to shift the role of prisons from punishment to reformation. "The men at Gramercy seem to grasp the idea that life behind bars is not, and should not, be designed to meet or exceed their previous consumption lives. Yet such approaches are viewed as mostly for the purpose of punishing rather than serving a return to society. In fact, one of the central findings of this research is that the men are eager to find ways to enrich their lives that go beyond accumulation of material items," the authors conclude.

More information: Ronald Paul Hill, Justine Rapp, and Michael L. Capella. "Consumption Restriction in a Total Control Institution: Participatory Action Research in a Maximum Security Prison." Forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

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