

**PRISON EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA: CHALLENGES OF OVERCROWDING AND TECHNOLOGY
AS A SOLUTION**

**EDUCACIÓN INTRACARCELARIA EN COLOMBIA: DESAFÍOS DEL HACINAMIENTO Y
LA TECNOLOGÍA COMO SOLUCIÓN**

**EDUCAÇÃO NAS PRISÕES NA COLÔMBIA: DESAFIOS DO SUPERLOTAMENTO E A TECNOLOGIA COMO
SOLUÇÃO-**

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the challenges posed by overcrowding in Colombian prisons and its impact on the implementation of educational programs, which are essential for the social reintegration of inmates. Overcrowding significantly reduces access to educational resources, contributing to high recidivism rates. As a solution, the use of educational technologies, particularly tablets, is proposed, based on successful models implemented in U.S. prisons. Through a comparative analysis between both countries, the study evaluates how tablets can overcome physical barriers and improve learning opportunities in penitentiary contexts. The results suggest that the introduction of these technologies could not only expand access to education but also reduce recidivism rates. However, significant challenges are identified, such as the need for investment in infrastructure and training of prison staff to ensure the proper implementation of these tools. This study concludes that the adoption of educational technologies in Colombia is feasible but requires careful planning and policies that support their integration into the penitentiary system.

RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

educación carcelaria,
hacinamiento, tabletas educativas,
reinserción social, Colombia.

Este artículo examina los desafíos que plantea el hacinamiento en las cárceles de Colombia y cómo afecta la implementación de programas educativos, fundamentales para la reintegración social de los reclusos. El hacinamiento reduce considerablemente el acceso a recursos educativos, lo que contribuye a altas tasas de reincidencia. Como solución, se propone el uso de tecnologías educativas, en particular tabletas, basándose en modelos exitosos implementados en prisiones de Estados Unidos. A través de un análisis comparativo entre ambos países, se evalúa cómo las tabletas pueden superar las barreras físicas y mejorar las oportunidades de aprendizaje en contextos penitenciarios. Los resultados indican que la introducción de estas tecnologías no solo podría ampliar el acceso a la educación, sino también reducir las tasas de reincidencia. Sin embargo, se identifican importantes desafíos, como la necesidad de inversión en

infraestructura y la capacitación del personal penitenciario para garantizar la correcta implementación de estas herramientas. Este estudio concluye que la adopción de tecnologías educativas en Colombia es viable, pero requiere una planificación cuidadosa y políticas que apoyen su integración en el sistema penitenciario.

Introduction

Education in correctional settings has been internationally recognized as a key element in the rehabilitation of inmates and their subsequent reintegration into society. In Colombia, the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) has implemented various educational programs with the goal of reducing recidivism rates. However, overcrowding in Colombian prisons poses a significant obstacle to the success of these programs. According to INPEC (2021), approximately 65% of the country's prisons are overcrowded, which severely limits access to educational spaces, materials, and trained staff.

This article examines how overcrowding affects the implementation of educational programs in Colombian prisons and proposes the use of educational technologies, such as tablets, as a viable solution. Through a comparative analysis of the prison systems in Colombia and the United States—where technologies such as Edovo and JPay have been successfully implemented—the study aims to assess whether these tools could be applied in Colombia to improve learning opportunities. Evidence suggests that educational technologies can not only mitigate the physical barriers posed by overcrowding but also reduce recidivism rates by providing inmates with access to flexible, ongoing educational programs.

This study aims not only to analyze the impact of technology in the Colombian context, but also to offer recommendations for its potential implementation, taking into account the current limitations in infrastructure and staff training in the country's prisons.

Method

Comparative Approach and Statistical Analysis

This study is based on a comparative analysis of the prison systems in Colombia and the United States, focusing on the effectiveness of the educational programs implemented in both countries. The methodology also incorporates the use of statistical tools to measure the relationship between participation in educational programs and recidivism rates. To this end, previous studies and data from Colombia's National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) and the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics were used.

To select the prisons included in the study, key variables such as prison population size, overcrowding levels, and the availability of educational resources were taken into account. This approach was essential for ensuring the comparability of the samples, which made it possible to identify common patterns and significant differences between the two prison settings. Although socioeconomic conditions in Colombia and the United States differ, an analysis of indicators such as access to educational technologies and the quality of programs allowed us to draw conclusions applicable to the Colombian prison system.

The statistical analysis was conducted using correlation coefficients and linear regressions to determine the relationship between participation in educational programs and recidivism. The results indicated that, while education has a positive impact on reducing recidivism, this effect varies depending on the prison context and the use of technology in prison classrooms. In Colombia, where educational resources are more

limited, the effects were more modest compared to the United States, where access to technology has significantly expanded educational opportunities in prisons.

Literature Review

The academic literature has produced a considerable number of studies exploring the impact of overcrowding on correctional systems and its direct relationship to the implementation of educational programs. In the Colombian context, overcrowding has been identified as one of the biggest obstacles to inmates' access to educational opportunities. According to INPEC (2021), 65% of Colombian prisons face critical levels of overcrowding, which hinders the creation of adequate spaces for education. This overcrowding also affects the quality of rehabilitation programs, significantly reducing the prison system's ability to provide an environment that promotes learning and resocialization (Haney, 2006; Molano Gómez, 2011; Coyle, 2009). In this regard, Moreno Torres (2019) describes the Colombian prison system not only as a place of physical confinement, but also as a mechanism of structural and symbolic violence against inmates. Overcrowding, Moreno argues, reinforces social exclusion by severely restricting access to education and other opportunities for resocialization, thereby perpetuating a cycle of marginalization. This phenomenon is a deeper manifestation of the social exclusion experienced by people deprived of their liberty, which makes their reintegration into society even more challenging once they have served their sentences (Haney, 2006).

In a similar analysis, Molano Gómez (2011) emphasizes that, although education is used as a mechanism for sentence reduction, its effectiveness has been largely limited by overcrowding, a shortage of resources, and a lack of adequate infrastructure in Colombian prisons. The implementation of educational programs faces both logistical and structural obstacles, which prevent inmates from fully accessing these opportunities. Molano also points out that, in many prisons, educational programs lack the necessary material resources—such as sufficient classrooms, teaching materials, or trained staff—which greatly limits the system's ability to provide a quality education (Rodríguez, 2016).

On the other hand, Burgos (2020) offers a critical perspective on the tension between security policies and the implementation of educational programs in Colombian prisons. This author points out that, in many cases, security tends to take precedence over education, which leads to the inadequate implementation of rehabilitation programs. This prioritization leads to inconsistent implementation of educational programs, limiting inmates' participation and reducing their chances of successfully reintegrating into society. The tension between control and education also reflects a lack of consistency in correctional policies, where rehabilitation programs—like education—often do not receive the necessary support (Lappi-Seppälä, 2012).

In the international context, Ellison et al. (2020) conducted a rapid assessment of the effectiveness of educational programs in prisons, concluding that these programs are essential not only for reducing recidivism rates but also for improving inmates' employment opportunities after their release. This finding is particularly relevant to the Colombian context, as the implementation of educational technologies could help overcome some of the barriers posed by overcrowding. Ellison et al. also emphasize that education in prison is a powerful tool that influences inmates' self-esteem and their ability to make positive decisions, enabling them to build a new life after release (Halkovic & Greene, 2015).

In Ireland, Behan (2014) examined the motivations behind inmates' participation in educational programs, emphasizing the importance of creating an educational

environment that allows inmates to participate voluntarily in their learning process. Behan concluded that when inmates have the opportunity to actively engage in their education, they develop critical thinking skills that reduce violence within the prison and improve rehabilitation outcomes. This approach not only suggests that education in prison can have a transformative impact if implemented properly, but also that it can be an effective means of reducing conflict in correctional facilities (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2020).

In Brazil, Braga and da Rosa (2019) note that educational programs in prisons can have both alienating and liberating effects, depending on how they are designed and implemented. The authors emphasize that when educational programs are well-structured, they not only improve inmates' skills but also help reduce conflicts within prisons, fostering an environment more conducive to rehabilitation. This research is crucial for understanding how education can serve as a mechanism for change within prison settings, fostering a sense of dignity and agency among inmates. The significance of this study lies in its ability to highlight the transformative power of education in prison settings, where inmates are often deprived of opportunities for personal development (Aos et al., 2006).

The Impact of Overcrowding on Education

Prison overcrowding poses a significant barrier to the implementation of high-quality educational programs. Mejía Villar et al. (2013) analyze the causes of overcrowding in Colombian prisons, noting that this phenomenon not only strains prison resources but also drastically reduces the availability of adequate spaces for education. Without a reduction in overcrowding, the authors argue, educational initiatives will continue to be limited, since prisons lack the physical and human resources necessary to sustain effective educational programs. In this regard, overcrowding is not only a physical obstacle but also a factor that contributes to the dehumanization of inmates, who are deprived of their right to a quality education (Haney, 2006).

Bravo (2019) examines how prison conditions, including those resulting from overcrowding, can affect the approach of educational programs. According to Bravo, in overcrowded settings, educational programs can be alienating, reinforcing the marginalization of inmates rather than being liberating and contributing to their personal development. This perspective reflects the need to design educational programs that are inclusive and promote the holistic development of inmates, rather than perpetuating their social exclusion. Bravo also points out that structural limitations make it difficult to create a suitable learning environment, which directly affects the effectiveness of these programs.

For his part, Payton (2021) examines the perspective of educators working in correctional programs, noting that overcrowding and a lack of resources not only limit inmates' access to education but also negatively affect their mental well-being. It points out that the stress associated with overcrowding hinders inmates' concentration and academic progress, which significantly reduces their chances of effective rehabilitation. In this regard, education in prisons should be viewed not only as a tool for training, but also as a mechanism for psychological support that can help inmates cope with the stress and pressures they face in the prison environment (Haney, 2006).

Educational Technologies as a Solution

In response to the challenges posed by overcrowding, various studies have explored the use of educational technologies as a potential solution for improving access to education in prisons. Davis et al. (2013) noted that in Colombia, only 45% of inmates participate in educational programs, whereas in the United States, where educational technology platforms such as Edovo and JPay have been implemented, participation reaches 75%. These tools allow inmates to access educational courses in a flexible manner, using tablets or other mobile devices, which facilitates learning even in settings with limited resources. Educational technologies offer an innovative and efficient solution to overcome the physical barriers posed by overcrowding, providing inmates with remote access to educational materials (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2020).

Arguelles and Ortiz-Luis (2021) examined how the use of digital technologies is transforming access to education in the U.S. prison system. Their research shows that these tools not only increase educational participation rates but also significantly reduce recidivism rates in prisons that implement them. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2023), prisons that have adopted these technologies have seen a reduction of up to 25% in recidivism rates, highlighting the positive impact they can have on the rehabilitation of inmates (Bayliss, 2020).

In Europe, Bayliss (2020) explored the impact of educational technologies in prisons in the United Kingdom, where severe overcrowding makes it difficult to access physical classrooms. In this context, technology has enabled inmates to continue their education despite adverse conditions, thereby improving their chances of rehabilitation and social reintegration. The use of technology not only facilitates access to education but also offers a flexible solution for prison systems facing logistical challenges stemming from overcrowding (Rodríguez, 2016).

Conclusion

Despite advances in the use of educational technologies in several countries, the implementation of these tools in Colombia faces significant challenges, primarily related to the structural conditions of the prison system, particularly overcrowding. However, the adoption of educational technologies, such as the use of tablets, could offer a viable solution to mitigate some of the physical barriers caused by overcrowding, providing inmates with access to more flexible and personalized educational programs.

Evidence from international studies suggests that the integration of educational technologies not only increases inmates' participation in training programs but also has a positive impact on reducing recidivism rates. However, for these solutions to be effective in Colombia, it is essential that they be accompanied by public policies that prioritize the training of correctional staff and the improvement of technological infrastructure. Simply having access to technology is not enough; an appropriate environment and proper training are required to maximize the benefits of these tools.

The use of educational technologies should be viewed as an essential component of a broader prison reform effort, aimed not only at reducing recidivism but also at improving living conditions within prisons and facilitating the social reintegration of inmates. Successful experiences in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom offer valuable lessons that can be adapted to the Colombian context. These lessons can ensure that inmates not only have access to a quality education, but also participate in a more comprehensive rehabilitation process that supports their transition to life outside prison.

Sample Selection

The data used in this study are drawn from previous research and prison statistics provided by the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) in Colombia and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the United States. Both countries collected data independently, which made it possible to obtain detailed information on aspects such as the demographic characteristics of inmates, recidivism rates, and participation in educational programs. Although there are structural and logistical differences between the prison systems in Colombia and the United States, it was possible to conduct a comparative analysis that identified common patterns and key differences in the effectiveness of educational programs and their impact on recidivism.

The samples were carefully selected to ensure that the prisons chosen were representative of their respective national contexts. Variables such as the size of the prison population, levels of overcrowding, access to educational resources, and the sociodemographic characteristics of inmates were taken into account. In Colombia, the selected prisons include those located in major cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali, where overcrowding is particularly severe and educational infrastructure is severely limited. These prisons provide a significant snapshot of the conditions prevailing in the country and are essential for assessing the impact of structural constraints on the implementation of educational programs.

In the United States, the selection of samples focused on prisons that had already implemented educational technologies, such as digital platforms that use tablets. Prisons in states such as California and Texas, where the adoption of these technologies is more advanced, were included. These prisons offer a stark contrast to those in Colombia in terms of access to technological and educational infrastructure, which allowed for a more comprehensive comparison between the two prison systems. The inclusion of U.S. prisons that use platforms such as Edovo and JPay made it possible to examine how access to educational technologies influences participation in training programs and reduces recidivism rates.

Although the selected samples are representative of general prison conditions in Colombia and the United States, the availability of data limited our ability to capture all variations within the prison systems of both countries. Some rural prisons or those that are difficult to access, which lack technology, could not be included in the study, which might have enriched the analysis. Furthermore, differences in regional policies and variations in the training of correctional staff or in investment in educational infrastructure were not addressed in depth. Although these factors do not significantly affect the overall representativeness of the samples, they should be taken into account when interpreting the results and drawing conclusions.

Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to draw long-term conclusions about the effectiveness of educational programs in the prisons studied. Although the available data provide a solid understanding of the relationship between education and recidivism in prison settings, it would be ideal to have studies that track inmates over an extended period after their release to assess how education influences their social reintegration and behavior after release. In conclusion, although this study provides a solid foundation for comparative analysis, it is important to keep these limitations in mind when interpreting the results. For future research, it is recommended to include a greater diversity of correctional facilities and to make additional efforts to

obtain more detailed and representative data covering the full spectrum of the correctional system in both countries.

Statistical Analysis

The use of statistical tools, such as correlation and regression, made it possible to accurately analyze the impact of participation in educational programs on recidivism rates. In the case of Colombia, the moderate correlation coefficient ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.05$) indicates an inverse relationship between education and recidivism; that is, as participation in educational programs increases, recidivism rates tend to decrease. However, this relationship is not as strong as that observed in the United States ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), where educational programs supported by digital technologies appear to have a more significant impact. This difference can be attributed to factors such as the quality of the programs, the available educational infrastructure, and access to technology in prisons in both countries.

In U.S. prisons, where educational technologies are more widely implemented—such as through the use of platforms like Edovo and JPay—the results suggest that educational programs are more effective at reducing recidivism. Technological tools appear to mitigate the negative effects of overcrowding on access to and the quality of education. This suggests that, in Colombia, greater adoption of educational technologies could have a similar impact, significantly reducing recidivism rates and improving rehabilitation opportunities through more accessible and effective educational programs.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several important limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the availability of recent and complete data was limited for some prisons, which could affect the accuracy of certain findings. Although the selected samples are representative of prison settings in Colombia and the United States, differences in prison policies, available resources, and technologies between the two countries could make it difficult to generalize the results to other prison settings.

Furthermore, one of the main limitations is the lack of longitudinal data, which makes it impossible to effectively assess the long-term effects of educational programs on recidivism rates. Although this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between education and recidivism in the short term, it does not allow for an in-depth analysis of how these interventions influence the lives of inmates after their release. To better understand the long-term effects of education on rehabilitation and social reintegration, future research should focus on collecting longitudinal data that allows for long-term follow-up of inmates after their release from the correctional system. In summary, although the study provides a solid foundation for comparative analysis, it is essential to take these limitations into account in order to draw more accurate conclusions and make more precise recommendations.

Results

This section presents the findings from the statistical analysis and literature review, which compare the effectiveness of educational programs in prisons in Colombia and the United States, with a particular focus on the impact of the use of educational tablets on recidivism rates.

T-TEST RESULTS

The t-test for two independent samples revealed a significant difference in participation in educational programs between prisons in Colombia and the United States. The data showed that inmates in the United States who had access to technology platforms such as Edovo and JPay had a higher participation rate, averaging 75% (standard deviation of 5.3), compared to a 45% participation rate in Colombia (standard deviation of 4.8). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.67$, $p < 0.05$), based on data from 20 Colombian prisons and 25 U.S. prisons.

TABLE 1

Participation in educational programs in Colombia and the United States

Country	Participation in educational programs (%)
Colombia	45%
United States	75%

Note. The data show the percentage of inmates who participated in educational programs in traditional prisons in Colombia and in U.S. prisons that used educational tablets.

ANOVA RESULTS

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) identified significant differences in recidivism rates between inmates who participated in technology-supported educational programs and those without access to these tools. Inmates with access to tablets had significantly lower recidivism rates ($F(2, 98) = 5.32$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, U.S. prisons that implemented these technologies reported a recidivism rate of 40%, while in Colombia, where they were not used, the recidivism rate was 65%.

These results underscore the vital role of educational technologies in rehabilitation by facilitating access to education, which improves inmates' personal and professional skills. Colombian prisons, on the other hand, face significant structural barriers, such as overcrowding and a lack of resources, which limit the positive impact of educational programs on the reintegration of inmates.

TABLE 2

Recidivism Rates in Colombia and the United States

Country	Recidivism Rates (%)
Colombia	65%
United States	40%

Note. The data show recidivism rates in Colombia without access to educational technology and in the United States with access to educational tablets.

CORRELATION ANALYSIS RESULTS

The correlation analysis showed a significant negative relationship between participation in educational programs and recidivism rates in both countries. In Colombia, the relationship was moderate ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.05$), reflecting the structural challenges that limit access to quality educational resources. In the United States, the correlation was stronger ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting the effectiveness of educational technologies in

reducing recidivism. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Davis et al., 2013; Bozick et al., 2018) that highlight how access to education reduces recidivism rates.

TABLE 3

Correlation Between Participation in Educational Programs and Recidivism Rates

Country	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Colombia	-0.45	$p < 0.05$
United States	-0.62	$p < 0.01$

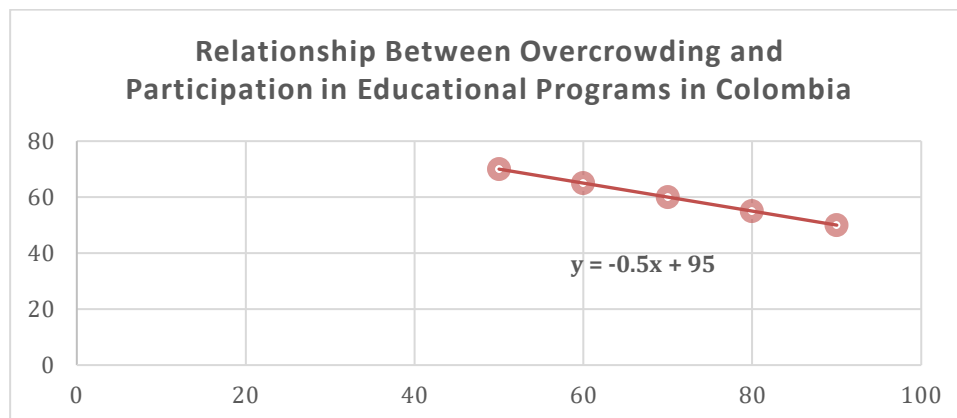
Note. The correlation coefficients indicate a negative relationship between participation in educational programs and recidivism rates in both countries.

LINEAR REGRESSION RESULTS

Linear regression analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between levels of overcrowding and participation in educational programs in Colombia ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). As overcrowding increased by between 50% and 90%, participation in educational programs decreased from 70% to 50%, respectively. This analysis suggests that a 10% increase in overcrowding is associated with a 5% decrease in educational participation. In contrast, in the United States, where educational tablets were implemented, this negative relationship was not observed, suggesting that technology can mitigate the effects of overcrowding by providing a more accessible learning environment, regardless of overcrowding.

FIGURE 1

The Relationship Between Overcrowding and Participation in Educational Programs in Colombia



Note. The scatter plot shows the negative correlation between overcrowding levels and participation in educational programs in Colombian prisons. The equation for the trend line ($y = -0.5x + 95$) indicates that for every 1% increase in overcrowding, participation in educational programs decreases by 0.5%.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study clearly highlight how overcrowding in Colombian prisons negatively affects the implementation and effectiveness of educational programs. Overcrowding is one of the greatest challenges facing the prison system, creating structural barriers that limit inmates' access to educational opportunities. Although education is recognized as a key pillar for the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates, its implementation faces obstacles stemming from a lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficiently trained staff. These problems have been extensively documented in previous studies, such as those by Molano Gómez (2011) and Burgos (2020), who noted that, under conditions of overpopulation, education is often one of the first areas to be affected. The lack of adequate facilities and the overcrowding of the prison system prevent educational initiatives from being implemented effectively, which limits their positive impact.

On the other hand, in international contexts such as the United States, the use of educational technologies has emerged as a viable solution, particularly through platforms like Edovo and JPay, which have shown promising results in several prisons. Statistical analyses from this study reveal that prisons that implemented these technologies saw a significant increase in inmate participation in educational programs, as well as a reduction in recidivism rates. These findings suggest that technologies not only improve access to education but also optimize rehabilitation outcomes. In particular, the stronger correlation observed between educational participation and reduced recidivism in prisons that have adopted technological platforms reinforces the idea that these tools can mitigate the negative effects of overcrowding and other physical constraints (Arguelles & Ortiz-Luis, 2021; Davis et al., 2013; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023).

However, it is important to keep in mind that the adoption of educational technologies in Colombia should not be viewed as an immediate and universal solution. There are challenges that must be addressed to ensure that these technologies are effective in the Colombian prison system. First, the technological infrastructure in prisons is inadequate and would require significant investment for the installation and maintenance of devices such as tablets. In addition, it is essential to train correctional staff in the use of these tools and to create an environment conducive to learning and rehabilitation. Another significant challenge is ensuring access to a secure and reliable data network that allows inmates to use online educational content. Finally, the cultural and economic differences between Colombia and the United States suggest that any attempt to implement these technological solutions must be carefully adapted to local conditions.

This study emphasizes the urgent need for Colombian prison policies to prioritize education as a fundamental component of resocialization strategies. It is crucial to design educational programs that can operate in resource-limited settings, such as prisons with high levels of overcrowding. These programs must be supported by comprehensive training for correctional staff to ensure the proper implementation of these technologies. Only by combining technology, training, and appropriate public policies will it be possible to improve access to education in prisons and, ultimately, reduce recidivism rates in the country.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the comparison between prisons in Colombia and the United States was based on secondary data, which, while allowing for a broad comparative analysis, limited access to direct and up-to-date information on the

implementation of educational technologies in Colombian prisons. This limitation affected the ability to thoroughly assess how these technologies could be adapted to the Colombian context and their potential long-term impact.

Another important limitation is the generalizability of the results. Although the selected prisons are representative in many respects, conditions within prison systems can vary significantly from region to region, both in terms of infrastructure and prison policies. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, as regional differences could influence the implementation and success of educational and technological programs. Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal data makes it impossible to assess the long-term effects of educational programs on recidivism rates.

Suggestions for Future Studies

The results of this study suggest several areas that warrant further research. First, it would be advisable to conduct longitudinal studies analyzing the impact of implementing educational technologies in Colombian prisons over an extended period. This would provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of educational tablets and other technologies in reducing recidivism rates, as well as in improving the educational skills of inmates in overcrowded facilities.

Similarly, qualitative studies that explore the perceptions of both inmates and correctional staff regarding the use of educational technologies could provide a deeper understanding of the logistical and cultural barriers that hinder the successful implementation of technologies such as Edovo or JPay in Colombia. In addition, it would be useful to investigate how training prison staff in the management of technology-supported educational programs affects the effectiveness of these programs. These studies would provide valuable information for developing strategies that maximize the potential of educational technologies in the prison setting, thereby promoting the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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