

# Educating Offenders

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To examine the effects of education on incarcerated offenders, 60 inmates who had earned a baccalaureate degree while incarcerated were tracked after their release from the North Carolina Department of Corrections. Their recidivism rates were compared with inmates who had not pursued education while incarcerated. The data for this study were gathered from education and recidivism studies of 30 U.S. states. The results show that inmates who earned baccalaureate degrees while incarcerated became law-abiding individuals significantly more often than inmates who had not advanced their education while incarcerated. Since it is less expensive to educate inmates than to reincarcerate them, lowering recidivism rates should become a mission of the correctional community, and college degree programs must be an intrinsic part of that mission.

American prison experts concern themselves with correctional population yet seem to neglect correctional outcomes. That is, 425,409 inmates were released from American institutions in 1993 and, once released, many of those inmates received no significant opportunity to change their lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Although the American public is decidedly punitive toward criminals, it is more lenient toward inmates because they are not an immediate threat. And while the public does not expect correctional organizations to control crime, people believe that incarceration alone will stop crime.<sup>3</sup> That is, people expect incarceration to teach the offender a lesson.

Therefore, it could reasonably be argued that, from the public's perspective, reducing recidivism is the responsibility of the community into which convicts are released, not the prisons from which they are released. Nonetheless, placing unprepared, uneducated, unusually bitter individuals in the community could increase the threat to public safety and increase recidivism, because many Americans see violence as an appropriate response to danger.<sup>4</sup> (For the purpose of this article, recidivism is defined as a return to prison for a criminal offence other than a technical violation of parole.)<sup>5</sup> Many released inmates, however, commit crimes and elude detection or receive penalties other than incarceration for their crimes.

Correctional education has three functions: first, it acts as an agent of change for both the inmate and the system; second, it remains committed to freedom of inquiry; and third, it provides an opportunity to study, evaluate and respond to all variables in the individual, the system and society that are to benefit from the educational concerns with process, product and social reform.<sup>6</sup> Correctional education will reduce unproductive prison time, help inmates understand society, give non-custody professionals an opportunity to monitor correctional operations, and reduce recidivism. Although some researchers see academic progress as the primary purpose of education, it does confer secondary benefits such as employability.

## The controversy

Does correctional education reduce recidivism? Most of the evidence appears to be inconclusive.<sup>7</sup> Some writers argue that the evidence does not correlate correction education with reduced recidivism, while others go further and suggest that nothing can alter criminally violent behaviour.<sup>8</sup> These opponents argue that criminal tendencies learned on the outside cannot be unlearned on the inside. Martison<sup>9</sup> argues that, except for some isolated cases, the rehabilitation efforts of advanced education reported so far (1947–1967) have done nothing appreciable to reduce recidivism. Martison's influence in corrections has frequently been associated with the shift from a treatment/rehabilitation orientation to a just-deserts/justice orientation.

## Methodology

All degree-granting institutions participating in North Carolina inmate education were asked to submit data about male and female inmates to whom they granted degrees. Additionally, 10 years' worth of criminal records of North Carolina non-degree-inmates were examined.

Specifically, 320 inmates earned 373 post-secondary degrees in North Carolina prisons from one private university and four community colleges between 1981 and 1991. The participants in this study originally resided in one female prison and five male prisons, largely in the southeastern region of North Carolina. All were high-security prisons serving high-risk offenders.

## Findings

When the North Carolina data were pooled with data from other U.S. states, the results clearly showed that earning a degree while incarcerated significantly reduced recidivism in both male and female offenders. More specifically, 60 educated men and women prisoners who earned a four-year degree in prison were not reincarcerated during the three years after their release, and all but one of these individuals found employment relating to their degree. The degree-earning offenders earned more than they did before their incarceration (if employed — most were unemployed at the time of their arrest and conviction). These findings support the position of Ryan and Mauldin<sup>10</sup> and are consistent with Jenkins, Pendry and Steurer,<sup>11</sup> who report that inmates released from prison who had completed a two- or four-year degree while incarcerated earned far more money than they had before going to prison.

State statistics show that approximately 40% of North Carolina's general prison population was reincarcerated within three years of release.<sup>12</sup> Applying this statistic to the study sample (assuming that the degree-earning offenders were typical of the general inmate population of North Carolina) would mean that 24 former inmates (40% × 60) instead of three would have been reincarcerated. The difference of 21 inmates saved North Carolina taxpayers \$1,942.29 per day (at \$92.49 per inmate) or \$708,935.85 for the first year of reincarceration and each year thereafter.<sup>13</sup> This fact is consistent with calculations from a state auditor who projected a saving of US\$6.6 million for every 1% reduction in recidivism.<sup>14</sup>

It should be noted that, although all states were asked to submit data, only 30 correctional educational directors responded and only eight of those were from states that had studied the correctional education and recidivism question. After evaluating their data, it appears that the earning of two-year and four-year college degrees by inmates lowers recidivism rates. The following are examples of the data received.

## Alabama

In Alabama, adult correctional education is provided through the Department of Post-Secondary Education. The Alabama two-year college system is responsible for delivering correctional education programs to inmates throughout the state. One community college was established to serve seven correctional institutions. Of Alabama's 19,492 inmates, approximately 11% are enrolled full time in correctional education. The general prison population recidivism rate in any given 12-month period averages 35%, compared with 1% for inmates who complete post-secondary degrees.<sup>15</sup>

## Florida

Florida's correctional system has approximately 60,000 inmates. Of these, 23% (14,000) participated in diverse academic, vocational and special education programs delivered by the Correctional Education School Authority (CESA). More than 7,000 diplomas and certificates of achievement or completion were awarded. CESA-educated inmates were 19% more likely to find employment after release than inmates who were not CESA-trained. Clearly, employment opportunities reduce recidivism. However, CESA had not conducted any recidivism tests based on education.<sup>16</sup>

## Illinois

In 1988, the Illinois Department of Corrections studied 760 releases including: inmates who completed academic education programs only; inmates who completed vocational programs only; inmates who completed both academic and

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vocational programs; and a control group. Results show that releasees<sup>17</sup> who completed academic secondary or post-secondary programs or non-accredited community college vocational programs were less likely to reoffend and more likely to be employed than the control group, who did not complete either vocational or post-secondary school education while incarcerated.

### Oklahoma

Oklahoma researchers examined 360 inmates who, while incarcerated in Oklahoma, participated in college-level courses offered through the Televised Instructional System (TIS). TIS participants were matched with a cohort of non-participants. Results show that TIS participants had lower recidivism rates than the matching group.<sup>18</sup>

### Maryland

In Maryland, Jenkins and his colleagues reported that inmates released from prison who had completed a two- or a four-year degree while incarcerated were most likely to be employed. Of further importance, 46% of the inmates released from the general prison population of Maryland's 19,014 inmates were returned to prison within three years of their release, compared with none of the 120 inmates who received degrees while in prison.

### New York

In 1992, New York's Correctional Service reported that 24 colleges and universities throughout the state provide college programming for approximately 3,500 inmates in 66 correctional institutions. Of the inmates who earned a college degree (academic or vocational) while incarcerated, 26% were returned to prison, compared with the 45% who were returned from New York's general prison population.

### Texas

In Texas, 44,282 of the state's 120,000 inmates (38%) received educational services. The criminal justice center at Sam Houston State

University conducted a two-year recidivism study of inmates in the Texas system. Of the 60 men and women who had earned degrees and were released, 10% (6) returned to prison. Generally, the recidivism rate in Texas is 36%.

Other data were analyzed to determine recidivism rates for various types of degree earners who left Texas prisons between September 1990 and August 1991. Two years after release, the overall recidivism rate for degree holders was only 12% and inversely differentiated by type of degree (associate 14%, baccalaureate 6%, masters 0%). The projected savings to Texas taxpayers for the reductions in recidivism described above range from US\$11.6 million to as high as US\$130.7 million.

### Conclusion

The consistency in the study results demands acknowledgment — that is, positive educational intervention for inmates is necessary because it is practical, ethical and effective at reducing crime. When the costs of accredited correctional education are compared with the costs of reincarceration, results support funding for correctional education. Conservatively, of 425,409 inmates released in 1993, 45% will reoffend within three years.

It is recommended that the correctional system do whatever is necessary to keep the public safe from recurring criminal behaviour. One of the most cost-effective methods of accomplishing

this objective is to educate criminals. An effective education, including a holistic educational experience, can be provided by experienced educators through accredited institutions of higher learning. It is important to note that short-sighted or poorly managed educational experiences are inappropriate in the prison classroom, and unlikely to contribute to the results reported in this article.

In sum, high-quality education is the least-expensive model of recidivism reduction. With certain offenders, education will work. Other offenders are unlikely to be deterred from

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committing crime by anything the correctional system has to offer. The results of this study clearly identify a link between correctional

education and reduction of recidivism by means of employment. ■

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- <sup>2</sup> For specific data, see the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (1996). D. J. Stevens, "The Impact of Time Served and Regime on Prisoners' Anticipation of Crime: Female Prisonisation Effects," *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, in press 1998. See also "The impact of time served and custody level on offender attitudes," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 7, 3 (1995): 12-14. And see "The Depth of Imprisonment and Prisonisation: Levels of Security and Prisoners' Anticipation of Future Violence," *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33, 2 (1994): 137-157.
- <sup>3</sup> C. A. Innes, "Recent Public Opinion in the United States Toward Punishment and Corrections," *The Prison Journal*, 73, 2 (1993): 220-236. See also J. Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1975).
- <sup>4</sup> D. J. Stevens, "Prison Regime and Drugs," *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36, 1 (1997): 14-27. See also "Communities and Homicide: Why Blacks Resort to Murder," *Police & Society* (summer, 1997). And see "Explanations of Homicide: Interviews with Female Killers," paper presented at the annual conference of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Las Vegas, NV, 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> Recidivism has many definitions, including "repetition of criminal behaviour." Another definition includes "fingerprinted rearrests for alleged crimes." See S. Clarke and A. L. Harrison, *Recidivism of Criminal Offenders Assigned to Community Correctional Programs or Released from Prison in North Carolina in 1989*, report prepared for the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, Institute of Government (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> M. V. Reagen and D. M. Stoughton, *School Behind Bars: A Descriptive Overview of Correctional Education in the American Prison System* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976): 15.
- <sup>7</sup> S. P. Lab and J. T. Whitehead, "From Nothing Works to the Appropriate Works. The Latest Stop on the Search for the Secular Grail," *Criminology*, 28 (1990): 405-419. And see K. P. Morrison, "Reading, Writing, and Recidivism," *CEA News and Notes*, 15, 2 (1993): 11.
- <sup>8</sup> M. K. Cary, "How States Can Fight Violent Crime. Two Dozen Steps to a Safer America," Background (The Heritage Foundation, 1993). And see F. T. Cullen and K. E. Gilbert, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1988).
- <sup>9</sup> R. Martison, "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," *The Public Interest* (Spring 1974): 22-50.
- <sup>10</sup> T. A. Ryan and B. J. Mauldin, "Correctional Education and Recidivism: A Historical Analysis" (Report available from University of South Carolina, College of Criminal Justice, Columbia, SC, 1994).
- <sup>11</sup> D. Jenkins, J. Pendry and S. J. Steurer, *A Post-Release Follow-up of Correctional Education Program Completers Released in 1990-1991* (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Division of Correction, 1992).
- <sup>12</sup> North Carolina Department of Corrections, *Report on Inmate Incarceration Cost Per Day for the Year Ended June 30, 1995* (Raleigh, NC: 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> North Carolina Department of Corrections, *Report on Inmate Incarceration Cost Per Day for the Year Ended June 30, 1995*.
- <sup>14</sup> Windham School System, *Three-Year Outcome Study of the Relationship Between Participation in Windham School System Programs and Reduced Levels of Recidivism* (Huntsville, TX: Windham School System, 1994).
- <sup>15</sup> M. Gregg, *Education and Recidivism Report* (Deatsville, AL: Ingram State Community College, 1995).
- <sup>16</sup> CESA, *CESA Annual Report 1994-1995* (Tallahassee, FL: CESA 1995).
- <sup>17</sup> Illinois Council on Vocational Education (ICVE), *Correctional education: A way to stay out*. Recommendations for Illinois and a report of the Anderson Study (Springfield, IL: Illinois Department of Corrections, 1988).
- <sup>18</sup> M. Langenbach, M. North, L. Aagaard and W. Chown, "Televised Instruction in Oklahoma Prisons: A Study of Recidivism and Disciplinary Actions," *Journal of Correctional Education*, 41, 2 (1990): 87-94.

## Coming up in *Forum on Corrections Research*

*The May 1998 issue of FORUM will focus on "Parole and Corrections."*