

## The Readability of Inmate Handbooks

*The educational level of those entering federal institutions is low. Of the 5,776 federal offenders who took part in some kind of educational program during the 1989-90 fiscal year, close to one third participated in the adult basic education (ABE) program currently, at any one time, about 1,400 offenders - over 10% of the federal inmate population - are enrolled in some type of ABE program.*(1) The Deputy commissioner of the Ontario region, Andrew Graham, speaking in June 1992 to a regional chairpersons' meeting of the Ontario Region citizens' Advisory committees, stated that 50% to 60% of the inmates now entering the federal system in Ontario are at a Grade 5 level of education.

The inmate handbooks issued to offenders at each federal institution contain essential information on the institution's regulations, programs and practices. can inmates understand the handbooks provided?

### Study Methods

The sections of inmate handbooks containing regulations concerning visitors, finances and security or disciplinary matters from seven Canadian institutions were analyzed for their readability. The analysis was done with the commercial computer program RightWriter 4.0, by Que Software. Although it is an American program based on the U.S. educational system, it gives an indication of the clarity and readability of the writing analyzed.

Two handbooks from British Columbia, four from Ontario and one from the Atlantic region were analyzed. One handbook was from a minimum security institution, four were from medium-security and two were from maximum-security institutions.

Clarity of writing is necessary for inmate understanding, as the following quote from one of the manuals explains: "Clearly knowing rules and following them explicitly will bring about satisfactory performance which will prevent you from having to cope with any disciplinary sanctions." An analysis of this sentence through Rightwriter indicated a 16th grade level of education was required to comprehend it.

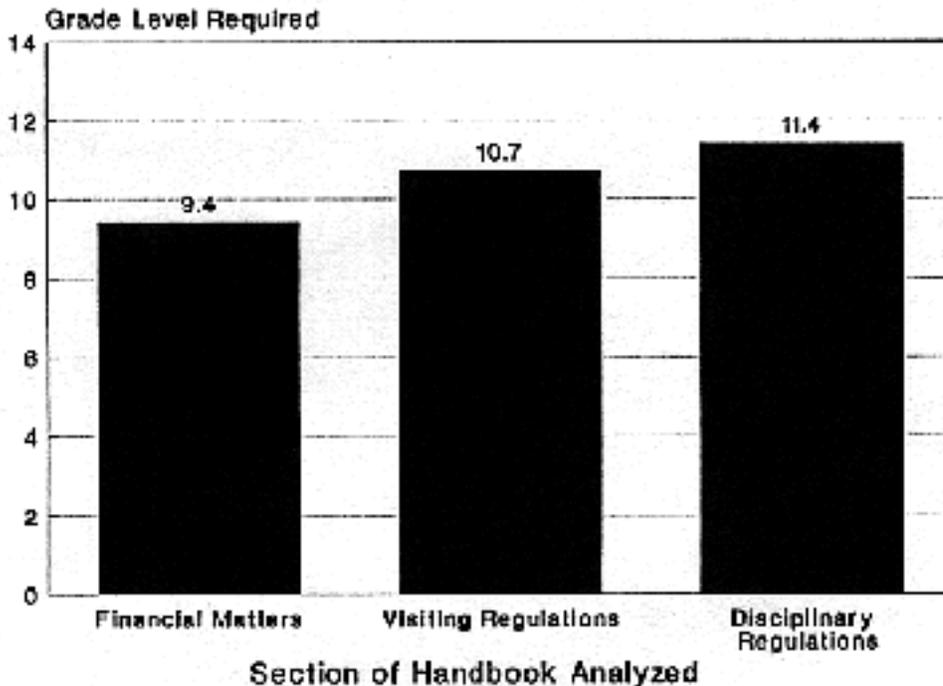
### Results

Results of the analysis of the inmate handbook sections are shown in the figure.

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### Figure 1

## Level of Education Required to Understand Inmate Handbooks



Sections dealing with financial matters proved easiest to read, requiring from Grade 9 to Grade 10 levels of education, with an average (mean) of 9.4.

Regulations regarding visits showed a greater discrepancy in reading ease from institution to institution, ranging from Grade 7 to Grade 14 with an average of 10.7.

The disciplinary regulations required education ranging from Grade 9 to Grade 15 with an average of 11.4.

Although these differences in the reading levels needed to understand regulations concerning discipline, finances and visitors were not statistically significant, they did **approach** significance. This suggests that some subjects are more difficult to explain simply than others.

No significant differences were noted in the reading levels required for handbooks from institutions of differing security levels, indicating a consistent level of writing within the institutions across Canada and between the security levels.

### Conclusions

These findings are disturbing. The regulations concerning both pay and visitation involve important elements in the lives of inmates, yet they are not written simply enough to be understood easily.

Breach of the regulations concerning discipline could have a direct effect on inmates' apparent suitability for parole. However, if inmates cannot understand the regulations, they are much more likely to commit an offence within the system, which would be recorded in their file.

The Ontario region has now undertaken a program to revise inmate handbooks to make them more comprehensible. It is hoped that other regions are following suit.

More generally, there is a warning in these analyses to ensure that any-thing written for inmates is written clearly.

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(1) Correctional Service of Canada, "Adult Basic Education: can It Help Reduce Recidivism?" Forum on Corrections Research, 3, 1(1991), p. 4.