

Education programming for offenders

by **Dennis J. Stevens**¹

College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts

Controlling crime through education may be an effective and economical method of reducing recidivism rates. Phrased differently, education may be one means of improving reintegration potential of offenders. This article examines education as one method of preparing an offender to step back into his or her community with a renewed sense of self image, pride through the accomplishment, and a plan to stay clear from one of the stimulators of criminal activity — unemployment.

Context

Offenders admitted into the custody of the Correctional Service of Canada typically rank among Canada's most poorly educated citizens. Nearly two out of three offenders (64%) have not completed their high school diploma, of whom 30% have not even completed grade eight. In 1993/94, 70% of newly admitted offenders tested below the Grade-8 literacy equivalency while more than four in five new inmates (86%) scored below Grade-10.²

The research indicates that the concept of incarceration as a form of punishment does not necessarily deter criminal activity on the street or in prison.³ Returning uneducated individuals to the community could represent a further threat to public safety and may enhance recidivism rates. Sending individuals back to their respective communities through education provides a better understanding of society as a whole.

Education programs

Currently, educational and vocational programs are available at most correctional institutions in Canada. Educational programs consist of Adult Basic Education — (Grade 1 to 10), Secondary Education, Vocational, College, and University level programs. Prisoners generally pay for their own post-secondary education, unless it can be demonstrated that the education addresses a specific criminogenic need. Through vocational programs such as plumbing, welding and small engines repair, prisoners are provided with job related skills training relevant to employment opportunities available in the institutions and in the communities.

One of the most recognized programs is CORCAN. Through its five business lines — Agribusiness,

Construction, Manufacturing, Services and Textiles — CORCAN provides offenders with work experiences and training which replicates private sector work environments as closely as possible. CORCAN programs are in place in 32 institutions across Canada, creating the equivalent of 2,000 full time trainee positions.

The mission of correctional education

The role of correctional education is to:

- function as an agent of change for both the prisoner and the system;
- maintain its integrity in terms of its basic commitment to freedom of inquiry; and
- study, evaluate, and respond to all variables in the individual, the system, and society that are to be benefited by the educational concerns with process, product, and social reform.⁴

We add that the role of correctional academic education could:

- relieve boredom of dead-head prison time;
- give student-prisoners a better understanding of society;
- give non custody professionals an opportunity to monitor correctional operations;
- keep offenders busy with positive pursuits;
- give prisoners an opportunity to experience values of a law abiding individual (teachers); and
- alter behaviour preventing costly reincarceration.

The controversy

Does correctional education reduce recidivism rates? Some authors argue that there is no conclusive evidence correlating correction education to reduced recidivism while others go further and suggest that little can alter criminally violent behaviour. For example, Martinson⁵ argues that with few and isolated exceptions, rehabilitation efforts of advanced education that have been reported so far (1947-1967) have had no appreciable effect on reduced recidivism. Martinson's influence in corrections has frequently been associated with the

shift from a treatment/rehabilitation orientation in corrections to a just deserts/justice orientation.

Opponents to correctional education argue that criminal tendencies learned on the outside cannot be "unlearned" on the inside, and, they add, offenders gave up their rights to amenities such as education when they took away the rights of others.⁶

On the other side of the controversy, a total of 97 articles published between 1969 and 1993 were abstracted by researchers who examined the relationship between correctional education and recidivism levels.⁷ The results reveal "solid support for a positive relationship between correctional education and [lower] recidivism." In the 97 articles, 83 (85%) reported documented evidence of recidivism control through correctional education, while only 14 (15%) reported a negative relationship between correctional education and reduced recidivism.

Additionally, one study examined the recidivism data of 60 released prisoners for a three-year period in the United States.⁸ According to this study, each participant had earned an associate and/or a bachelor's degrees while incarcerated in a high custody North Carolina prison. When the data were pooled with data from other States, it appeared that earning a degree while incarcerated significantly reduced recidivism rates for both male and female offenders. Specifically, of the 60 North Carolina released prisoners, 5% (3, all males with associate's degrees) were returned to prison for criminally violent offences in the 36 months following their release. Women and male offenders who earned four-year degrees were not reincarcerated during the three-year period after their release, and, all but one of these individuals found employment relating to their degree. Also, the income of the degree-earning students was greater than their income prior to incarceration if employed, but most of them were unemployed at the time of their arrest and subsequent conviction. These findings are congruent with a study that shows individuals who received higher education while incarcerated have a significantly better rate of employment (60-75%) than those who do not participate in college programs (40%).⁹

Encouraging education

One method to encourage education in the penitentiary is to have part (or all) of the educational process delivered inside prison and part (or all) of the educational process delivered outside of prison,

thus program consistency is equally important. A student can take the same module or program at many locations throughout Canada. The advantages of having offenders engaged in an educational pursuit is that correctional supervision is shared through teachers and other students while meeting educational objectives and ultimately reducing recidivism levels.

Methods of delivery

Modules should include different methods of educational delivery in classrooms conducted by qualified educators, merged with a delivery system via computers, distance learning methods, and/or telecommunication programs. Distant learning methods work well but require full time qualified educators to be part of that system. In fact, those instructors should be the primary focus of the system. However, technology teaching must be part of the curriculum so students can compete for challenging jobs.

Assessment

As educational programs get underway, assessment methods should be in place to determine the effectiveness of those programs. That is, the utility of non-traditional forms of assessment is an important issue. Stecher, Rahn, Ruby, Alt, and Robyn¹⁰ suggest a focus of program definition, implementation, and administration; the quality and feasibility of the assessment; and the potential usefulness of the assessment approach for educators.

Conclusions

Offering individuals under correctional supervision, a student-centred educational program, provides an avenue for those offenders who want change, an opportunity to advance themselves.

An interesting guide about educational reform comes from Tyack and Cuban¹¹ who suggest the following:

1. No master plans for the fixing of all problems will be accepted. We cannot leap into a perfect educational system, but must work to make things better bit by bit.
2. Involve teachers, parents, and administrators in the process of reform and make sure that the "answers" are to questions that are being asked by those involved.
3. Move in small steps. ■

Education is the cornerstone of a progressive society and an efficient agent for social change.

- ¹ 48 Suomi Road, Quincy, MA 02170.
- ² Boe, R. (1998). *A two-year follow-up of federal offenders who participated in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program*. Research Report R-60. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.
- ³ Stevens, D.J. (1998a). "The impact of time-served and regime on prisoners' anticipation of crime: Female prisonisation effects", *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 37(2), 188-205. See also "Educating offenders". *Forum on corrections research*, 10, (1), 1998, p. 33-35. "Violence begets violence" *Corrections Compendium: The National Journal for Corrections*, American Correctional Association, 22, #(12), 1-2, 1997, and "Prison regime and drugs", *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36, #(1), p. 14-27, 1997.
- ⁴ Reagen, M.V. and Stoughton, D.M. (1976). *School behind bars: A descriptive overview of correctional education in the American prison system*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, p. 15.
- ⁵ Martinson, R. (1974). "What Works? Questions and answers about prison reform". *The Public Interest*, spring, p. 22-50.
- ⁶ Reagen and Stoughton (1976).
- ⁷ Ryan, T.A. and Mauldin, B.J. (1994). *Correctional education and recidivism: An historical analysis*. Report available from University of South Carolina, College of Criminal Justice, Columbia, SC.
- ⁸ Stevens, D.J. and Ward, C., (1997). "College education and recidivism: Educating criminals is meritorious". *Journal of Correctional Education*, 48, (3), p. 106-111.
- ⁹ Center on Crime, Communities and Culture. (1998). *Education as crime prevention providing education to prisoners*.
- ¹⁰ Stecher, B.M., Rahn, M.L., Ruby, A., Alt, M.N. and Robyn, A. (1997). *Using alternative assessments in vocational education*.
- ¹¹ Tyack, D. and Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Harvard, MS: Harvard University Press.

Are you looking for FORUM?

Please contact CORCAN Mail Distribution if your address label is incorrect, if you would like to be added to the FORUM mailing list, if you need more copies of a FORUM issue or if you would like to cancel a subscription. Just fill out the form on the inside of this issue's mailing cover (or write a letter) and send it to the following address:

CORCAN MAIL DISTRIBUTION

Publications Service

La Macaza Institution

321 Chemin de l'Aéroport

La Macaza, Quebec J0T 1R0

Tel: (819) 275-2315, ext. 7121

Fax: (819) 275-3037

You can also reach CORCAN Mail Distribution by phone. In Canada and the United States, call toll-free: 1-800-665-8948. In other countries, call collect: (819) 275-2315, ext. 7121.