

The Transition from Incarceration to the Community

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“We must accept the reality that to confine offenders
behind walls without trying to change them is an
expensive folly with short-term benefits -- winning
battles while losing the war.”

-- Former U.S. Supreme
Court Chief Justice Warren Burger

EPIGRAPH

“AMERICA IS THE LAND OF SECOND CHANCES
AND WHEN THE GATES OF PRISON OPEN
THE PATH AHEAD SHOULD LEAD TO A BETTER LIFE.”

President George W. Bush
State of the Union Address, 2004

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to clarify the effectiveness of education, job training and rehabilitation programs inside of correctional facilities. There are many educational opportunities inside of correctional institutions; the problem with the programs being effective is due to the low percentage of inmates that enroll or take advantage of the educational opportunities. Studies have shown that the completion of an educational or vocational training program may contribute to the inmate's self-worth and increase motivation; whereby they will have the tools to succeed once they are release from prison, and be able to find employment. With the success of the educational programs it is now seen as an important part of treatment for prisoners; therefore attempts are made to train prisoners in many skills, and trades to aid rehabilitation into society after their release so they can try to maintain a crime free life.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today there are nearly two million prisoners that are incarcerated in prisons, and the numbers continue to rise. Due to this increase in the prison population legislators are trying to demand that more prisons be built; and the programs that are currently being used to prevent crime be removed. The issue of building more prisons and re-arresting offenders has been shown not to prevent or reduce crime; it has been proven that incarceration is more expensive, and less effective at preventing future crime than are alternatives. The alternatives of providing correctional education and job training have been shown to be effective forms of crime prevention. The cost to incarcerate a prisoner ranges from \$27,000.00 to \$35,000.00 per inmate, per year, and that cost is rising. (Bernstein, 2000)

Many of the prisoners that come into prison have limited educational vocational, and employment skills, sixty-five percent are high school dropouts, 70 percent are shown to be functionally illiterate, and 63 percent recidivate (Bernstein, 2000). Due to the limited skills of a prisoner it will be more difficult for them to be a part of the working force; which eventually will make it impossible for them to build upon a life away from crime.

The number of prisoners that are released back into society every year is about 600,000. This large amount of prisoners can present a problem to the community they return to; if they are not given the resources to become equipped to find employment.

The instruction and implementation of prison programs will definitely provide a foundation; which can help pave the way for the many challenges that men and women are faced with once they are released from prison. The success of the programs will help transform the recidivism prisoner into a rehabilitated prisoner that can have great rewards in their transition back into society. Another challenge that prisoners face are the barriers to housing, employment, and relationship with family members. These barriers can be eliminated if the prisoners learn a trade or skill, and acquire good work habits, which may greatly improve his or her chances of successfully integrating into society upon his or her release. This paper will show that providing incarcerated prisoners the link to education and job training skills that they did not receive before incarceration can enhance their social and economic opportunities once they are released from prison. Like the old adage “knowledge is power” and without receiving the basic knowledge we will find them right back in the criminal justice system. Failure to provide prisoners with a purpose while in custody would only mean that life beyond custody will be one without hope and vision, and a society even more infested with crime and unsafe for all. According to the National Institute of Justice Report, prison education is far more effective at reducing recidivism than boot camps, and shock incarceration.

In conclusion, this paper will provide information and important data on the effectiveness of prison education, research methods that are used to measure the effectiveness of education in prison, the importance of education, and rehabilitation programs, legislation that has been enacted, goals of prisoner reentry, and recommendations.

II. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRISON EDUCATION

To be effective, correctional education programs must meet the sole needs of inmate students. The challenges that present a barrier for the educational process to be effective are poor self-concept, low achievement levels, and learning disabilities. Fortunately, research into correctional education has revealed various characteristics of effective correctional learning environments. In order to improve inmate's ability to succeed in school, there must be an assessment of what the student's strengths and weaknesses are. A way to go about this process is for educators to point out concrete examples of the student's present successes to encourage the belief that the student can be successful. In addition, inmate's achievements in correctional education programs should be based on competency; rather than on comparison with others.

To measure the effectiveness of the educational process; an inmate must be given a curriculum that addresses their specific needs; this is important to help define the skills that they lack. Once the lack of skills are addressed this can help the prisoner's self concept. When a prisoner's self-esteem is lifted this will make a difference in the outcome of the way they feel about life and life circumstances.

The educational programs can also help deter people from committing criminal acts and can greatly decrease the likelihood that people will return to crime after release from prison. Apart from the apparent connection between education and employment, which enables ex-offenders to find employment after release, quality educational programs can produce a change in thinking and outlook; both during the time that the individual is incarcerated and after release.

Additionally, correctional education in the long run can create some major net cost savings; these savings will keep the cost of incarceration down; whereby there will be less inmates returning to prison. The savings far outweigh the need to educate versus incarceration. For each prisoner that takes education and are successful by not returning to prison will save the state about \$20,000, and one million dollars invested in education would prevent 26 re-incarcerations, for a net future savings of \$600,000. How can the prison system not realize that educating a prisoner will have better results than incarceration?

Correctional education can be the difference between a released offender and a repeat offender. There are programs that can equip prisoners with the skills necessary for career and life success. Although the magnitude of program outcomes has yet to be conclusively documented, studies indicate that participants have lower rates of recidivism and earn higher wages than those not receiving educational services.

In conclusion, to determine the effectiveness of prison education there should be some type of follow-up done, whereby; there is a sufficient period of time that has elapsed between the release and possible return. After all higher education can be a critical factor in the ability to maintain family relationships, and help keep the family intact. It also can be a positive motivator to make some life changes for the individual and the community where they will return. Implementing the smallest amount of change can make a large difference, and that difference can be the education that an inmate receives while incarcerated.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

There have been numerous researches on how correctional education, has made a difference in prisoner's life once they were released back into society. The first study was The Three State Longitudinal Study that consisted of Ohio, Maryland and Minnesota; which addressed methodological concerns that were raised about the rigor of correctional education research by: (1) using a treatment and comparison group for the study; (2) statistical controls for factors other than participation in correctional education that might impact recidivism; (3) addressing concerns related to self-selection bias; (4) using more than one measure of recidivism including re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration; and, (5) using a longer period of time for assessing outcomes. The study involved about 3,600 inmates that were released from prison between 1997 and 1998 (Smith, 2001).

The study focused on the prisoner's previous education they received while they were incarcerated. The study consisted of over 500 variables that were collected on each participant, and the design framework included internal control groups (Smith, 2001). There were three things considered to be measured for a period of three years which were the prisoner's re-arrest, reconviction and re-incarceration rates. The rates turned out to have a significantly lower level for those who took part in the education classes while incarcerated. The Three State Longitudinal Study also compared those who received education programs while incarcerated, versus those who did not receive the programs.

The data was collected from five primary sources they were Inmate Self-Report Pre-Release Survey, Institutional/Educational Records, Parole Officer Surveys, Criminal History Data, and Employment and Wage Data. (Smith, 2001)

The results of the Three State Longitudinal Study showed giving inmates an opportunity to take correctional education classes can have a significant impact on recidivism, and that they are totally against the idea of locking people up and “throwing away the key” without offering them an alternative for rehabilitation, which is through education.

The second research study; that was done to show how important education was to the transition of women prisoners back into society, was implemented by the Leslie Glass Foundation. This study was led by Michelle Fine, Professor of Social/Personality Psychology, at The Graduate Center of the University of New York. The research methods chosen to complete the study was, a longitudinal analysis of post-release re-incarceration data, archival and cost benefit analysis, group and individual interviews. There were 274 women that were enrolled in the educational programs compared to 2,031 that were not involved in any type of program; the length of time for this study was 36 months. (Fine, 2003)

In this study there were four questions to be addressed:

1. What are the fiscal costs and benefits of providing education to women in prison, and what are the fiscal costs and benefits of withholding college from women in prison?
2. What is the impact of college in-prison on the safety and management of the prison environment?

3. What are the social and personal effects of college in-prison on students and their children?

4. What is the impact of the college experience on the transition home from prison?

RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

A national review of 20 empirical studies reveals that higher education greatly reduced the rates of re-incarceration; which showed a consistent pattern for those who had participated in the educational programs.(Fine 2003)

Out of a 100 there were 93% of prison wardens that strongly supported educational and vocational programming for adult inmates. It was also found out that disciplinary incidents are less likely to occur, and when there was an incident where tension arose; educated inmates were more likely to stay away from trouble, especially if it placed there educational process in jeopardy. (Fine, 2003)

Education offered in prison offers women the opportunity to think, grow, and reflect on the past and the future. The educational process also signals a process of personal development, and transforms the devastation of prison into an opportunity to turn one's life around; which enables for a safe and final transition.

The last result of the study; concluded that even with all the skills and strengths developed through the educational process in prison, life after prison was difficult. The problem was a lack of support networks. The most exciting news about the women in this study was that for 8 years 20 of the graduates that were released from this prison post-release program; were employed and doing well in society.

IV. PURPOSE OF PRISON /JOB EDUCATION

The purpose of prison education is to provide offenders with the opportunity to gain academic, social and work skills to become productive while in prison and when released. Correctional education has many potential benefits. For example, "adult education in prison could lead to a reduction in criminal behavior, to post release enrollment in education, to better post release employment history, and to fewer disciplinary problems" (Gerber & Fritsch, 1995).

According to the 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics, 68% of state prison inmates did not graduate from high school. Over ¼ of the inmates said they completed the GED while serving time inside a prison. When inmates are released, they face many barriers to employment such as low education levels, stigma and lost time in the labor force. Based on research in the Education & Employment and Reentry Briefing Paper, inmates who can read, write, do arithmetic, or who have vocational training have better employment outcomes than their counterparts. If former inmates are able to find jobs, they are able to support their families, contribute to their communities and feel that they are productive.

The success of prison educational programs can be seen in the New York State Department of Correctional Services (NYSDOCS) 1996 Annual Report of the Academic and Vocational Program. The results stated that 49% of the inmates, who entered the prison program with no degree, had reading scores below the fifth grade level. Once they completed the training 49% had accomplished reading scores at the eighth grade level or above. Job training and education offers prisoners marketable skills to help them obtain employment after release.

The following programs; are examples of programs that can help enhance the prisoner's skills; whereby he or she can become invested in a productive life.

- Adult Basic Education involves the basic skills that focus on mathematics, reading, and writing.
- Adult Secondary Education helps prepare the prisoner to be able to take the General Education Development (GED) test or an alternative certificate of high school completion.
- Vocational Education involves training that equips the offender with the basic skills to find employment.
- College Coursework consist of advanced instruction that allows inmates to earn college credit that may be applied towards a 2-4 year postsecondary degree.
- Special Education is geared towards inmates with learning disabilities.
- Study Release involves inmates that are released from the prison to attend coursework offered in community schools.

V. THE SUCCESS OF REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

Data shows that inmates who have participated in education and employment programs and treatment programs for substance abuse, emotional, mental and sex offence, have a reduced rate of re-incarceration. Even though some program success rates are modest, there are other reasons why prison programs are useful; they can add structure, variation and productivity to the lives of inmates.

The Second Chance Program is a prison-based crime and drug rehabilitation model which provides six to eight-month of instruction; that focuses on four areas. The four areas that are vital to the rehabilitation of inmates are a Drug Rehabilitation Module, an Education Module, a Self-Respect Module and a Life Skills Module. This program was started in 1995 at the Ensenada Prison in Baja, California. The Second Chance Program started with 40 inmates in the first six months of its inception; by the year 2000 the enrollment was 500(Westrum, 1995).

The results from the Second Chance Program included 192 inmates that had completed some part of the Second Chance Program before they were released; those who had completed the first month of the program before release, their normal recidivism rate of 70% dropped to less than 10% (Westrum, 1995). For those who completed two months of the program, the recidivism dropped to less than 5% and those who were in the program for four months or longer it showed their recidivism rate dropped even further.

Another important factor in the study was those who participated in the initial rehabilitation steps, their recidivism rate was again less than 10%, and if they completed approximately 3 months of the program, the recidivism rate dropped to approximately 5% (Westrum, 1995). Due to the fact that the recidivism rate had dropped so much for those participating in the program, the assumption could be made that not as many are engaging in criminal activity. According to official government reports, over the course of the year 2000, the crime rate in the city of Ensenada, Mexico dropped 55%. Government sources attributed the low crime rate to the Second Chance Program. (Westrum, 1995)

The Second Chance Program has also been instrumental in reducing violence in the prison, substance abuse by inmates, lowered criminal recidivism and has made a significant impact on the crime rate in the community, thereby providing an effective social solution.

The Insight Prison Project (IPP) which was started in 1988 is a non-profit community organization that is working in partnership with San Quentin State Prison in California. The purpose of the IPP program is to provide effective psychological interventions with practical self-awareness techniques that will help inmates shift from reacting blindly to refining skillful responses. Through this educational process the inmate can experience lasting behavioral changes; whereby they can successfully reunite with their families and positively contribute to their communities.

The program offers 18 classes reaching 300 prisoners a week. The classes are aimed at re-educating inmates while preparing them for successful re-entry into society upon their release. The structure of these different classes has a unique curriculum that focuses on rehabilitating the mind and body through meditation. The success of the IPP Programs has changed many lives; listed below is a testimonial of a former prisoner.

Prisoner Joseph:

"I have learned to find freedom in myself, finding ways to make choices, learned to be a parent and role model, learned tools to control my temper...I want to thank all the instructors for their time and patience with me, to be the person that I am today, with the change in me. I will be going to school to become a juvenile counselor to teach young adults that life in prison is no life. I thank you for all the changes." The testimonial from Joseph is an example of the impact that providing education and vocational skills in prison can play in the transformation stage of an educated offender's life.

In summary, the impact of providing the different programs can provide the offender with the skills and knowledge to become productive citizens whereby; they are not repeat offenders that prey upon the criminal justice system.

VI. LEGISLATION ON PRISON EDUCATION

The listed pieces of legislation have made strides to help those prisoners who have been incarcerated. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty has participated in legislative efforts to recognize the problems formerly-incarcerated individuals face in reentering society, and their basic human right to shelter and food. This bill is an important first step in the process of ensuring better coordination and planning for release, providing for improved housing opportunities, job training and education for those who desperately need it.

Another important piece of legislation has been the Second Chance Act which was introduced in 2004 by Representatives Rob Portman, Danny Davis, Mark Souder, Stephanie Tubbs-Jones, Steve Chabot, and Chris Cannon. This was not the first time this bill was presented; it has been presented numerous times; but still has not been made into law. (NTJN, 2000)

The Second Chance Act goals are to reduce recidivism, increase public safety, and help states and communities to better address the growing population of prisoners returning to communities. (NTJN, 2000) The House bill (HR 1704) focuses on four areas: jobs, housing, substance abuse/mental health treatment, and families. It is the first piece of comprehensive legislation to address multiple challenges related to the return of incarcerated persons from prisons to their communities (NTJN, 2000).

VII. GOALS OF TRANSITION /REENTRY

Thousands of offenders are released each year from prisons. Their successful transition to the community without re-offending is critical to the safety of the community. The Reentry process consists of evaluation, planning, and programming that is conducted, to prepare and assist those who were previously incarcerated, to return safely to the community as law-abiding citizens. There should be steps in place to make sure the released offenders have the appropriate resources available to help them become self-serving and independent; whereby they can make the right choices.

According to the National Institute of Corrections and others, the transition process should begin with a comprehensive assessment and plan developed at the time the person first arrives at a correctional facility. This process can be achieved by incorporating what the Michigan Department of Corrections uses to assess the prisoner's risks, needs and strengths throughout incarceration and recommends specific, measurable goals to reduce risk, and build upon strengths to sustain the accountability needed for success.

MPRI involves three phases: (Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative)

I. Getting Ready (Institutional Phase) outlines the offender's term of imprisonment.

II. Going Home (Re-Entry Phase) focuses solely on the prisoner's transition back to the community.

III. Staying Home (Community Phase) spans community supervision and the offender's eventual discharge (MPRI 2003).

VIII. BARRIERS

The increasing number of prisoners that are returning home that are not prepared to deal with life from behind bars, will be faced with many barriers. The majority of inmates that leave prison have no savings, no entitlement to unemployment benefits, and no job prospects. They will also be faced with barriers such as finding a place to live, employment and repairing the bond between family and friends. There will also be those who will remain plagued by substance abuse and health problems, and many will be rearrested and returned to prison for new crimes or parole violations.

The first barrier is housing. Access to affordable, stable housing is critically important to the successful reentry of recently released prisoners. If housing does not become available to the ex-offender their sense of hope may become shattered; which may lead them to be homeless. There is evidence that high numbers of prisoners become homeless during reentry. The barrier that exists in providing housing to ex-offenders is their criminal record. Housing is also very vital to obtaining employment because many employers look for people who have stability plus an address.

The second barrier is employment. Upon returning to the community, former prisoners face a number of significant barriers to securing employment. First they have limited education; and poor skills; they are furthered hindered by obstacles such as laws prohibiting ex-felons from certain occupations.

The third barrier is families. Adjusting back into family life can be difficult for some ex-prisoners. Some families are reluctant to accept ex-offenders back into their homes for fear of criminal activity and eviction.

The problem that exists for ex-offenders is their transition back into the community with limited resources. Much of what ex-offenders encounter upon release to their communities can be resolved. The problem is that for too long the standard approach has been for ex-offenders to fend for themselves with little or no support or guidance. How can this be possible when they have no monetary means to support themselves or a family? One way to deal with the barriers that ex-offender faces upon their release; can be minimized if they are provided with assistance before they leave prison in reference to housing and employment issues.

Another vital strengthening tool is the family. Families provide a very important link to stability this will help the ex-offender adjust and have a sense of support; which can be important in the rehabilitation of the ex-offender, and be the difference between success and recidivism.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pre-screening

All prisoners should be evaluated upon the initial phase of incarceration; to access their mental and physical needs.

2. Educational and Vocational classes should be mandatory

It should be mandatory that all prisoners be made to participate actively in all aspects of the education and vocation curriculum.

3. Post-screening

Once a prisoner has completed his or her time in prison, there should be services and jobs lined up to provide assistance.

(Implement and fund post-release supportive services)

(Provide a continuum of employment-related services)

5. Follow-up

This service should be mandatory for the released offender; this will reveal if the offender is making progress, and if not what can be done to make sure he or she stay on the right road.

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