

Analysis of Recidivism Rates for Participants of the Academic/Vocational/
Transition Education Programs Offered by the Virginia Department of Correctional
Education

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Abstract

The following report is an analysis of statistical information on program completers of various academic, vocational, and transitional programs offered by the Virginia Department of Correctional Education (DCE) to the inmate population within the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC). The study was initiated by the Superintendent of the Department of Correctional Education and was designed to assess the impact of DCE programs on recidivism. The sample of three thousand records (N = 3,000) of men and women released during the period 1979 – 1994 was examined with regards to involvement in educational programs while incarcerated and post-release reincarceration within the Virginia Department of Corrections and employment status while on parole/probation. Findings suggest that completion of an educational program while incarcerated may be positively and directly related to post-release community adjustment.

Review of the Literature

Recent media surveys suggest that crime is ranked as one of the most distressing issues facing our society (Gibbs, 1993; Ingrassia, 1993; Roberts, 1994). Unfortunately, these concerns appear to be warranted. The Bureau of Justice (1994a) estimates that in 1992, 91.2 violent crimes were committed in the United States for every 1,000 persons over the age of 11. The rate of property crime in the same year was 152.2 offenses for every 1,000 households. Recent efforts to pass the “Three strikes and you’re out” crime bill (e.g., Berliner, LaCourse, and Riveland, 1994; Ifill, 1994) suggest that the public is particularly concerned about repeat offenders. Once again, data by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1985; 1987; 1989) supports this concern. Approximately two-thirds of offenders released from state prisons will be rearrested for a new crime within three years of their release, and recidivists account for a substantial proportion of the

crimes reported to the police. Given this high rate of relapse, it becomes clear that the current epidemic of violence facing our nation will not be seriously reduced until methods are identified that change the behavior of known criminal offenders. Educational treatments that are applicable to a general population of incarcerated offenders represent one such possibility and warrant further investigation.

Concern over the prevalence of crime and recidivism has in recent years led many people to support a more “liberal” use of imprisonment and longer prison sentences (McCorkle, 1993; Zimmerman, Van Alstyne, and Dunn, 1988). This in turn has resulted in a doubling of the national prison population in the past ten years, and the number of offenders currently incarcerated has surpassed one million (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994b.) Social scientists, educators, law enforcement officials, and members of the judicial system continue to debate the effect of harsher, more punitive sentences on recidivism. However, those

questions are beyond the scope of this study. There is, however, a common belief that systematic educational opportunities offered to those incarcerated does reduce the number of persons who are returned to prison after a period of incarceration.

Current research offers empirical evidence that correctional education programs are effective in reducing crime. Although correctional rehabilitation programs received a flurry of negative publicity in the 1970's when it was stated that, "almost nothing works" (Martinson, 1974), subsequent analyses have suggested that such a global conclusion was premature. Gendreau & Ross (1979) reviewed 95 intervention studies with offenders conducted between 1973 and 1978 and found that 86% were successful, with reductions in recidivism ranging from 30-60%. Similar findings have been reported in other reviews of correctional programs (e.g., Greenwood & Zimring, 1985; Plamer, 1983; Thornton, 1987).

Upon further review of the literature, several researchers concluded that the most successful correctional programs are those that address an offender's cognitive functioning (Gendreau & Ross, 1979; Izzo & Ross, 1990). For example, Ross & Fabiano (1985) have described several deficits common to offenders that appear to be related to their criminality. This includes cognitive impulsivity, concrete reasoning, a lack of social perspective, and poor interpersonal problem solving. When offenders were provided intensive education to develop skills in these areas, recidivism was significantly reduced (Ross, Fabiano, & Ewles, 1988).

A Maryland study demonstrated the effectiveness of educational intervention with inmate populations as related to post-release employment (Jenkins, Steurer, & Pendry, 1995). Of the sample selected, 77% of those persons who had completed formal educational offerings were employed as reported by a supervising parole officer. Those who completed programs were also found to be employed at a level above the established minimum wage. The conclusion of this study is clear: educational intervention for inmates results in more positive post-release functioning, including higher employment rates, the type and wages of employment found, and a person's success on community supervision.

A review of the literature supports the value of educational intervention as an effective strategy to combat recidivism among offenders.

Operational Definitions

ABE: Adult Basic Education

Employment: defined for this study as verifiable work assignments for a minimum of 30 hours per week

GED: General Equivalency Diploma

Incarcerate: to be legally and physically confined to a penal institution within the Virginia Department of Corrections

Inmate: a person who is sentenced to a period of confinement in a Virginia penal institution

LIP: Literacy Incentive Program

Recidivism: to be physically recommitted to the Virginia penal system after having been released from a previous period of incarceration

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Academic

The Department of Correctional Education (DCE) offers a variety of programs to provide academic instruction to those persons who enter the Department of Corrections. Academic programs include instruction in literacy (Literacy Incentive Program) which is mandated by state law for those inmates who score below a predetermined level on standardized testing, Adult Basic Education courses, and GED preparatory instruction. Several schools have also instituted an academic/vocational linkage curriculum designed to provide refresher and remedial instruction to those inmates on vocational waiting lists. Every major institution has a full academic program including a library. More limited academic programs are available at each field unit.

Vocational

The vocational program includes instruction in 36 trade areas. There are vocational classes held in every major institution in the Virginia system and at six field units. In addition, the vocational program coordinates an apprenticeship program in various areas.

Transition

The transition program in the adult system is a relatively new endeavor of the department having been initiated at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in 1992. The transition curriculum provides instruction in employability skills, career assessment, budgeting and financial management, and life planning. There are now transition programs in four adult male institutions and the Virginia Correctional Center for Women. Two new transition education programs will be instituted as the Coffeewood and Lunenburg Correctional Centers.

Method

The Department of Correctional Education had not developed a systematic process for tracking persons who had participated in educational programs once released from incarceration. When an inmate is released from prison, the individual's educational transcript is catalogued and stored.

For the purposes of this study, 3,000 inmate records were randomly selected from inmate files located in the DCE repository. The randomness of the sample is demonstrated by the selection process in which every fourth subset of files were selected.

Information related to educational program participation and program completion was extracted and entered into a data collection system. The identified records were then matched against existing Department of Corrections population lists to determine who had been reincarcerated. The records of those who were not returned to custody and were still on parole/probation supervision were then cross referenced with parole office records to determine those employed. When possible, individual contact was made to gather data related to the type of employment, skill level, and program evaluation.

Data collection of sample participants was completed by the research team and faculty and staff from the following DCE schools: Mecklenburg Correctional Center, Greenville Correctional Center, Units A, B, C, Buckingham Correctional Center, Powhatan Correctional Center, and the Virginia Correctional Center for Women.

Results

Over four thousand (4,000) inmate records were initially included in the data pool. These records were selected at random utilizing existing student records housed at the Department of Correctional Education central office located in the James Monroe Building, Richmond, Virginia. The initial pool was screened and one thousand two hundred and seventy three (1,273) records were eliminated because of incomplete or inaccurate information. A working pool of three thousand records (N = 3,000) became the sample. The pool included records of persons, both men and women, released during the period 1979 - 1994. [See Table 1.]

TABLE 1

Sample: Number of Records by Year

| Year Released | # Of Records |
|---------------|--------------|
| 1979 | 42 |
| 1980 | 101 |
| 1981 | 279 |
| 1982 | 151 |
| 1983 | 186 |
| 1984 | 219 |
| 1985 | 177 |
| 1986 | 195 |
| 1987 | 268 |
| 1988 | 230 |
| 1989 | 237 |
| 1990 | 203 |
| 1991 | 193 |
| 1992 | 174 |
| 1993 | 181 |
| 1994 | <u>164</u> |
| | N=3,000 |

A summary of the educational participation of the study group is presented in Table 2. [see Table 2]

TABLE 2

Sample: Number of Records by Educational Participation

Educational Participation/Number of Records

| | |
|--|-------|
| No educational involvement during incarceration/ | 1,307 |
| Academic enrolled but did not complete/469 | |
| Vocational enrolled but did not complete/316 | |
| Academic Completers/451 | |
| Vocational Completers/456 | |

Percentage of Reincarceration

After matching the identified records with the existing list of current inmates in the Virginia system, the following information was found:

- of the 1,307 persons who had no educational programming while incarcerated, 641 (49.04%) were reincarcerated in the Virginia Department of Corrections;

- of the 786 who enrolled in educational programming but did not complete the program, 298 (37.9%) were reincarcerated in the Virginia Department of Corrections;

- of the 907 completers of educational programming, 183 (20.17%) were reincarcerated in the Virginia Department of Corrections. [See Table 3 below.]

Employment Status

Three hundred and forty seven (347) persons were identified as being currently on parole supervision. A survey was sent to those parole districts to determine employment status. The following information was found:

- of the 183 individuals who had no educational programming while incarcerated, 77 (54.6%) were employed for a period exceeding ninety (90) days;

- of the 96 individuals who were enrolled in educational programming but did not complete the program, 59 (61.4%) were employed by an employer for a period exceeding ninety (90) days;

- of the 68 individuals who completed educational programming, 53 (77.9%) were employed by an employer for a period exceeding ninety (90) days. [See Table 4 below.]

TABLE 3

Percentage of Reincarceration

| | Total Number | Number Reincarcerated | Percentage Reincarcerated |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| No educational involvement during incarceration | 1,307 | 641 | 49.1 |
| Academic enrolled but did not complete | 469 | 179 | 38.2 |
| Vocational enrolled but did not complete | 319 | 119 | 37.3 |
| Academic completers | 451 | 86 | 19.1 |
| Vocational completers | 456 | 97 | 21.3 |

TABLE 4

Employment Status for Individuals on Parole

| | Number Employed | Percentage Employed |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| 183 had no educational programming while incarcerated | 77 | 54.6 |
| 96 were enrolled but did not complete educational programming | 59 | 61.4 |
| 68 completed educational programming | 53 | 77.9 |

Study Limitations

The present study is limited by a variety of factors including the following:

1. lack of prior study within the Agency which would have established baseline figures;
2. inability to determine if a released inmate is incarcerated in: a. another state jurisdiction; b. the federal penal system;
3. inability to determine if a released inmate is deceased.

[Note: for factors 2 & 3, all the categories studied were exposed to the same risks and the random nature of this study prevents any one area from being more impacted than the other.]

Discussion

These findings suggest that successful completion of an educational program may be positively and directly related to post-release community adjustment. As demonstrated above, the difference in return rates for those who did not enroll in educational programming during incarceration and those who enrolled but did not complete was consistent with recidivism statistics provided by the Department of Corrections. However, those who did enroll and complete educational programming while incarcerated returned to custody at a much lower rate.

The information gathered also suggests that the employability rate of those persons who complete educational programming while incarcerated is a much higher figure than those who do not complete any educational programs. This information is important because it represents employment with a stable employer, the payment of state and federal taxes, and the receipt of credits for quarters of employment through the social security administration.

All research has limitations and this study is not an exception. The data available did not contain the depth of information necessary to examine the possible reasons why those who are not enrolled in educational programming or enroll and do not complete return to custody at a higher rate than those who enroll and do complete. For example, it should be noted that this study did not include information regarding participation in other prison programs. Therefore, if post-release adjustment is attributable to some degree to participation in prison programs, it is impossible to disaggregate the effects of multiple programs on post-

release adjustment from available data.

Finally, factors such as an individual's motivation to enter and complete educational programming while incarcerated, changes in an individual's level of commitment to complete programming, and the level of support from family and friends in the community may affect an inmate's post-release community adjustment and the likelihood of being returned to custody. This study does have value in that it is the first attempt within the Department of Correctional Education to quantify the effect of correctional education on recidivism rates within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Conclusion

The findings of this research support the position that completing an educational program during a period of incarceration is positively related to post-release adjustment. In addition, the results are an important indicator of the need for further in-depth research.

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Biographical Sketches

Kim A. Hull, Ph.D., is now the state program Supervisor for Cognitive and Transition Educational Programs with the Virginia Department of Correctional Education. He has been an adult GED teacher, adult transition education specialist, and now program developer during an eleven-year career in correctional education. He has received degrees from Virginia Wesleyan College, and Duke University and done post-doctoral studies at the University of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University.

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