

Correctional Education and Recidivism

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Abstract

How important is education? Education is the experience of learning by different methods. It can be formal or informal, take place in a home or in a classroom, be related to a job or related to pleasure, serve the purpose of job training, or have some other reason. Nations that invest in education enjoy greater benefits in terms of living standards, job skills, and the ability to develop its citizens toward civic responsibility. Given all the “good” that comes from education, it makes sense that access to education should be for as many people as possible. The question is — can any good come out of educating those that have wronged society? The reality is that most offenders will eventually return to society for better or for worse. Education hopefully can help this be for the better. This research reviews whether educating the offenders of society is a good use of educational resources.

Education and Recidivism

How important is education? Education is the experience of learning by different methods. It can be formal or informal, take place in a home or in a classroom, be related to a job or related to pleasure, serve the purpose of job training, or have some other reason. Nations that invest in education enjoy greater benefits in terms of living standards, job skills, and the ability to develop its citizens toward civic responsibility. One proof is the biennial study from the National Center for Educational Statistics that reports educational indicators for the *Group of Eight (G8)* nations. The study concludes, “In all reporting G-8 countries, higher employment rates were associated with higher levels of educational attainment” (Burns, Malley, Miller, & Sens, 2009, Summary, p. v). Education is a major factor in turning a “developing nation” into one that is industrialized, has a higher standard of living, and modern infrastructure.

Given all the “good” that comes from education, it makes sense that access to education should be for as many people as possible. The question is — can any good come out of educating those that have wronged society? Most offenders will eventually return to society for better or for worse. Recidivism is when the offender returns to prison. Can education reduce the cycle of recidivism thereby showing a return on investment in terms of lower prison cost and by adding productive members to society?

Literature review

Erica Meiners (2009) observes in the DePaul Journal for Social Justice,

Research consistently documents that education reduces re-incarceration: the more education those in prison receive, the lower the recidivism rates. Post-secondary education, in particular, has the highest rate of reducing recidivism” (p. 88).

However, Carl Owens (year) opines that a correlation between education and recidivism needs further research. Owens writes,

Indeed, it appears that access to educational opportunity may deter engagement with criminal activity. Although scholars have correlated increased educational attainment with lower levels of recidivism, they lack the ability to determine exact relationship between the two. (p. 317)

If there is a correlation between education and reduced recidivism, the benefits not only accrue to the learner that was incarcerated but to the state and society as a whole.

The high cost of a prison population

From a social and economic perspective prisons represent a high cost to taxpayers. The United States has the largest prison population in the world and according to Mercer shows no trend to decline. Mercer writes,

In 2007, 1 in every 198 Americans was serving time in prison—Wow!! (West & Sabol, 2009). By 2011, it is estimated that this ratio will be 1 out of every 182 Americans (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2007). The growth in the prison population is expected to be so exponential that the total prison population in 2011 will essentially be enough to populate three large metropolitan cities (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2007). The incarceration rate is on a steep incline and shows no sign of decline in the near future. (Mercer, 2009, para. 2)

The National Institute of Corrections reports that almost half of the world's prison population is in the United States. With a prison population of 9 million prisoners in 211 countries, the United States has a population of 714 prisoners for every 100,000 persons. That is the highest per capita, with Russia being second at 532 per 100,000 persons. Over 2 million are incarcerated in US prisons (Walmsley, n.d., Key Points). The total operating cost for US prisons has grown

from \$3.1 billion in 1985 to more than \$17 billion in fiscal year 1994 (Austin and Coventry, 2001, p. 1). Austin and Coventry note that the National Council on Crime and Delinquency estimate the cost for 2000 will exceed \$37 billion (2001, p. 1).

Competition for state dollars

The high cost of prisons must be considered not only in terms of a taxpayer burden, but understood in terms of competition for those dollars between correctional and educational institutions. Meiners (2009) writes, “Between 1984 and 2000, across all states and the District of Columbia, state spending on prisons was six times the increase of spending on higher education” (p. 85). Solomon Moore (year) writes in the New York Times, “Criminal correction spending is outpacing budget growth in education, transportation and public assistance, based on state and federal data.” In a time of reduced tax revenues, states will prioritize their spending. The decision to provide scarce resources for educational programs in correctional institutions might depend on proving that there is a bigger “bang for the buck” and a return on investment that is linked to educational dollars being spent in correctional institutions. Rates of recidivism become very important numbers as constructs for showing lower correctional costs and the return of a person to being a productive member of society.

Moore (year) notes “A survey of 34 states found that states spent an average of \$29,000 a year on prisoners, compared with \$1,250 on probationers and \$2,750 on parolees. The study found that despite more spending on prisons, recidivism rates remained largely unchanged” (para. 5). This means that for every inmate not returned to prison, the state saves the difference between the average cost of imprisonment and the average cost of probation or parole; about \$27,000. However, if recidivism rates remain unchanged, one may postulate that whatever cost is above necessary cost to house prisoners is a waste of resources. This would include

educational cost, rehabilitation programs, or cost to improve prison standards. Recidivism rates then become one of the most valuable measures in terms of social cost of a large part of our society.

The savings between the cost of incarceration and the cost of providing education can represent a significant return on investment in terms of state fund resources. Kerri Mercer writing for the Community College Review reports that a study by Florida Department of Education (1999) “asserted that the return on investment is US\$1.66 for every dollar invested in *correctional education*” (Mercer, 2009, Economic Cost).

Correctional—educational (CE) studies

Timothy Penny (year) writes,

Studies around the nation conclude that somewhere between forty and fifty-five percent of inmates find themselves back in jail. However, for those who secure a GED, the re-incarceration rate is in the range of fifteen to twenty-three percent (p. 123).

Penny notes that in one California study, “it was found that of those inmates who received a four-year degree, none were re-incarcerated” (p. 123).

However, studies of educational impacts on recidivism are only “promising” according to John Lewis. Lewis states that the correlation between recidivism and education is inconclusive.

Lewis (year) writes,

The current research model for most correctional education is a post-treatment quasi-experimental design, with one treatment and one control group, where the groups are released from prison and monitored for one to three years after release to determine the recidivism rate for each group. This survival analysis model, which evaluates only macro-level variables, often discounts alternative factors which might have caused a CE

[sic – correctional-educational] effect to have been dampened (e.g. post-release factors), thus in most of the studies, evidence that CE works to reduce recidivism is ambiguous.

(p. 287).

Correctional-educational (CE) studies may be flawed for other reasons. One problem is that without a national database, arrest data is not always clean from state to state, and re-arrests that take place in one state may not be included in studies from a different state. In addition, Lewis observes,

Researchers who attempt to unravel the effects of CE on recidivism are confounded with multiple program treatments, poor institutional record keeping, and conflicting definitions about what constitutes “program completion”. In reviewing the literature about CE research, these differences often are ignored, affecting the validity of the research. (p. 290)

A study of *Correctional Education (CE) Programs* by Barbara Wade of the University of Pennsylvania reviewed 13 research articles across multiple disciplines using database searches of JSTOR, Sociological Abstracts, Psychological Abstracts, Social Science Citations Index, and Wilson. The studies were primarily quantitative and included evaluations of prison educational programs and recidivism rates. As in other studies, Wade identifies challenges that must be overcome in CE studies. Wade notes that the definition of recidivism is “defined in a variety of ways, sometimes relating to the focus of the research” (Wade, 2007, p. 28). Some studies define recidivism as re-arrest, others as re-incarceration. Some studies include parole violations and others defined recidivism as “re-incarceration for a criminal offense, other than a technical violation of parole” (Stevens and Ward, 1997) (Wade, 2007, p. 29). Wade concludes, “Hence,

because of the many definitions of recidivism, it is difficult to determine whether prison education programs are successful” (p. 29).

The use of recidivism rates have been criticized because of the many challenges associated with their use. Wade (year) notes, however, research continues to use recidivism as a measure of effectiveness “because policy makers who fund rehabilitation programs need empirical evidence that these programs reduce crime” (p. 28).

Discussion

While it is difficult to prove a strong correlation between reduced recidivism and correction education, it may be easier to prove that a lack of education contributes to criminal behavior and to incarceration.—I would agree! Mercer writes,

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported that that 41.3% of incarcerated individuals have an educational level of some high school or less, compared to 18.4% of the general population (Harlow, 2003). Looking at higher level educational attainment, only 12.7% of incarcerated individuals have attended or graduated from college, compared to 48.4% of the general population (Harlow, 2003). When looking at educational attainment by offense committed, inmates who have committed a violent offense are slightly more likely to have a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) than those convicted of property-related offenses. (para. 5)

A study by the University of California concludes that high school dropouts are more likely to commit crimes and the probability of incarceration for black dropouts is as high as 60% in California (Belfield & Levin, 2009, p. 2). The authors note that high school graduation “reduces crime by 20% for murders, rape, and other violent crimes; by 11% for property crimes; and by

12% for drug related offenses” (p. 2). Tyler and Lofstrom writing for *The Future of Children* report,

Dropouts are greatly overrepresented in U.S. prisons. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 68 percent of the nation’s state prison inmates are dropouts. Dropouts constitute 62 percent of white inmates, 69 percent of black inmates, and 78 percent of Hispanic inmates (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009, p. 88).

High school dropouts have greater rates of incarceration, lower rates of employment, are more likely to be on welfare rolls and use social services, and will experience lower life time income (p. 86).

The reasons for high school dropouts and lower education rates are many ranging from literacy problems to special education needs. Whether it is due a learning disability or emotional behavioral disorder, the fact remains that there is a correlation between education and the economic future of most individuals.

Going back to our NCES study, “In all reporting G-8 countries, higher employment rates were associated with higher levels of educational attainment” (Burns, Malley, Miller, & Sens, 2009, Summary, p. v). If education enhances employability, it stands to reason that people who have educational opportunities will better chances for employment than those without an education.---right on!

Correctional education offers more than a diploma

The value of correctional education should not be judged only by the measure of reduced recidivism rates. The role of correctional education goes beyond the GED or college degree. It is not only focused on preparation for return to society. Education plays a big part in the quality of life for an individual inside or outside of the prison. Literacy, for example, becomes important in

a setting where reading is one of the few activities available. Reading for pleasure, for spiritual growth, or for personal development are some of the reasons for literacy programs. Quality of life issues on the inside of prisons include the ability to negotiate through conflicts, relieve stress, be able to perform document task such as balancing a checkbook or to write letters to loved ones. While job skills and employment are ultimate necessary goals, correctional education plays a part in the safety, security, and well-being of both inmates and staff in the prison setting.

Stefan LoBuglio, chief of release and reentry services for Montgomery County, MD Department of Correction and Rehabilitation summarized the value of correctional education writing,

The whole enterprise of correctional education — the teachers, the volunteers, the classrooms, the books, the computers — help humanize correctional facilities and plays a key role in relieving inmate stress and frustration by focusing incarcerated individuals on positive and constructive activities and relationships. Students benefit directly from these programs by improving skills and knowledge — staff, particularly correctional officers benefit from working with individuals who are more cooperative and better adjusted to their circumstances. More than that, educational programs help elevate the mission and professionalism of corrections from one of warehousing individuals to one of preparing individuals for their futures (Brazzell, Crayton, Lindahl, Mukamal, & Solomon, 2009, p. 3).

Correctional education is a cornerstone of the concept of rehabilitation. While many societies view incarceration in terms of punishment and judgment, societies that recognize the worth of individuals see rehabilitation as the most prudent course of action for dealing with crime. It is unreasonable to consider perpetual confinement for the majority of offenders. The fact that they

will eventually be freed from prison means that rehabilitation is necessary, not only for the offender but for society at large. Rehabilitation is *preparation for restoration* which includes life skills, job skills, character education, and treatment for special needs.

Conclusion and implications for future research

There are caveats that should be considered with any study of correctional education, and perhaps should be considered as possible variables in additional research. In a study of confidence intervals for 95% of any population, there are always going to be a part of the 5% that represent the ones where more education will not matter. There are educated criminals that commit crimes for reasons other than economics. A correlation between education and recidivism will not matter. As an example, two people may be hungry, and one will work while one will steal. Both have the same problem but make different choices. Criminal behavior in itself may not be because of a lack of education, especially is a crime is a crime of “convenience” or “passion”. That is one reason why any study can be challenged and that is why there is a debate about correctional education.

It has been noted that the research is difficult for many reasons, particularly in gathering data. Standards for ongoing research must be clearly defined. The development of better record keeping systems and standardized instructional programs should be considered for use across the many state correctional systems. Having more standardization will help alleviate disparity in studies. Corrections education must however continue. There are those for whom the educational opportunity provided a second chance and they have succeeded. This is the real proof that it works.

A well-known story is appropriate for any discussion of recidivism. A young boy was seen picking up starfish from off a beach and throwing them back into the ocean. The beach was strewn with millions of starfish and it was obvious that the boy’s efforts would never save most of the starfish. A man walking by spoke to the young man and said, “Son you will never be able to save

all of these starfish. Do you really think what you are doing matters?" The young boy replied as he picked up a starfish and threw it into the water — "It matters to that one."

References—I corrected the first two sources for you. I am not sure which APA format you are following.

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