

Literacy, Criminal Activity, and Recidivism

Cindy Hendricks, James E. Hendricks, Susie Kauffman

Never before in the history of the United States has reading taken such a vital role in shaping policy, practices, and politics. The nation's literacy rates have been at the forefront of many discussions by local, state and federal government agencies. A federal goal that all students read independently and well by the end of 3rd grade has been responsible for a variety of programs aimed at increasing students' reading performance.

But, what happens to those students who do not learn to read? For many students, reading problems lead to poor academic achievement, which, in turn, may lead to dropping out of school. According to recent statistics, 15% of the U.S. population dropped out of school before graduation because they fell so far behind in school that they lost hope of ever catching up (Adult Basic Education, 2000).

Although no single cause accounts for all delinquency and no single pathway leads to a life of crime, one of six factors identified as important predictors of delinquency among our nation's youth was poor educational performance (Lieb, 1994). Hodges, Giuliani and Porpotage (1994, p. 1) concurred, "one recognized characteristic of juveniles incarcerated in correctional and detention facilities is their poor experience with elementary and secondary education."

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the nature of the relationship between literacy, criminal activity, and recidivism. Through an examination of the literacy levels of the prison population, a comparison of literacy levels of the prison population with non-prisoners, an understanding of correctional education, and measures

of correctional program effectiveness, conclusions may be drawn regarding the role literacy plays in reducing recidivism among inmates.

Examining Literacy Levels of the Prison Population

After an in-depth analysis of the results of a 1978 study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Hodges, Giuliotti and Porpotage (1994) reported the average detainee was functioning at the ninth grade level, but reading at a fourth-grade level. Similarly, of all the inmates admitted through the Florida Department of Corrections, 69.9% performed at a literacy skill level of 8.9 or less (Florida Department of Corrections, 1997-98). Moreover, Correctional Education Connections (2000) reported that statistics from Texas indicated that the average prison inmate had an IQ of 87 with a sixth-grade education. Chaiken (1997) explored the educational level of death row inmates and found that of those on death row, sent to death row, or removed from death row in 1995, 44.5% had less than a 12th grade education. In a more generalized fashion, the Center on Crime, Communities and Culture reported that approximately 19% of adult inmates were completely illiterate, and 40% were functionally illiterate.

Paul Barton, director of Educational Testing Service's Policy Information Center, explained:

...a large proportion of the prisoner population is weak in using printed materials of the kind encountered in work places and daily life. One-third of prisoners at Level 1 (the lowest on a five-point scale) were unlikely to be able to do tasks such as finding an intersection on a map, filling out an application for a Social Security card, or calculating the cost of a purchase. Another third at Level 2 were unlikely to

be able to write a letter explaining a billing error or figure out miles per gallon using information from a mileage record chart. (ETS, 1996, p. 1)

According to a study conducted by Project READ (1978), the median age of youth confined to correctional facilities was 15.5 years. They were in the ninth grade, and read, on average, at the fourth-grade level. More than one-third of all juvenile offenders of this age group read below the fourth-grade level.

Comparing Literacy Levels of Prison and Non-Prison Populations

In 1992, an extensive investigation of the literacy skills among inmates was conducted by the Educational Testing Service in collaboration with Westat, Inc. and funded by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education (Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor & Campbell, 1992). The purpose of the survey was to profile the English literacy of adults in the United States, including prison inmates, based on their performance across a wide array of tasks that reflected the types of materials and demands encountered in their daily lives.

A total of 1150 randomly selected inmates in 80 randomly selected federal and state prisons were interviewed. Their answers and results were compared with 13,600 randomly selected adults over the age of 16, who lived in households across the country. Each participant spent approximately one hour responding to a set of literacy tasks as well as to questions about demographic characteristics, educational background, reading practices, and other literacy-related areas. Proficiency scores were reported on three scales that reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy.

Results indicated the average proficiencies of the prison population were 246 on the prose scale, 240 on the document scale, and 236 on the quantitative scale, substantially

lower than those of the household population (273 on the prose scale, 267 on the document scale, and 271 on the quantitative scale (Haigler et al., 1992). Approximately 70% of the prisoners performed in Levels 1 and 2 on the prose, document, and quantitative scales. Prisoners were more likely to experience difficulty in performing tasks that require them to integrate or synthesize information from complex or lengthy texts or to perform quantitative tasks that involve two or more sequential operations and that require the individual to set up the problem.

Nearly 51% of the prisoners completed high school or its equivalent, compared to 76% of the non-prison population. Prisoners who did not receive a high school diploma or GED demonstrated lower levels of proficiency than those householders (non-prison participants) who completed high school, earned a GED, or received some post-secondary education. Although inmates who received a GED demonstrated about the same proficiencies as householders with a GED, inmates with a high school diploma demonstrated lower proficiencies than householders with a high school diploma.

Another reported finding was that, generally, the higher the level of parental education, the higher the prisoners' proficiencies. The results also suggested that inmates who came from homes where only a non-English language was spoken demonstrated significantly lower proficiencies than those who came from homes where English was spoken.

Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor and Campbell (1992) concluded that inmates possessing a high school diploma should not necessarily be viewed as possessing the literacy skills needed to function in society; given that their performance was lower than that of householders with a high school diploma.

Understanding Correctional Education

Correctional education, having roots dating back to 1789 in Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail (Gehring, <http://www.ibiblio.org/icea/history.htm>), refers to all education (from basic literacy to vocational training to a college degree) given to people within the criminal justice system (probation, city jail, county jail, state prison, federal prison, parole). Educators within corrections facilities operate on the principle that attitudes, ideas and behavior can be corrected -- that humans are capable of progressing to higher thresholds of awareness (Gehring, <http://www.ibiblio.org/icea/history.htm>).

Correctional education programs help inmates to break the cycle of poor literacy skills and criminal activity by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed both in the workplace and in society. Effective correctional education programs help inmates develop problem-solving and decision-making skills they can use within the prison industry and in employment after their release (Steurer, 1996).

Measuring the Effectiveness of Correctional Education

The ultimate goal of correctional education is to reduce recidivism -- to help inmates become self-sufficient so that they can be re-integrated into society and become productive and successful workers, citizens, and family members (Cortley, 1996). Recidivism is defined as the rate at which released prisoners return to jail or prison without considering the reason for incarceration. While few deny the value of education or the significance of other outcomes, the ability to keep individuals from re-entering the criminal justice system is the ultimate test of correctional education program effectiveness (Using Correctional Education Data: Issues and Strategies, 1997).

In 1971, the California Department of the Youth Authority conducted an investigation to determine if gains in reading skill or participation in remedial education programs would lower recidivism for the nearly 1,000 participants who were determined to be academically deficient. Recidivism status was determined after three and fifteen months of parole. Neither reading skill gain nor participation in a remedial education program was found to be related to recidivism at either of these intervals. However, reading ability was found to be related to recidivism time. Those with low reading ability were more likely to recidivate within three months, while those with higher reading ability were more likely to recidivate during the fourth through fifteenth months.

Mace (1978) examined parole and intake records to follow 320 adult male inmates discharged in 1973 from West Virginia correctional institutions. At the end of 4 years, there were 76 recidivists; 55 were from the group that did not participate in educational programs. Only 7 of those completing the GED and only 4 of the college-level participants were re-incarcerated.

Holloway and Moke (1986) investigated 95 graduates of AA degree programs who were paroled during 1982-83. The graduates were compared to a randomly selected group of high school graduates (including GED) who had received their degree inside or outside of prison and a third group of 106 randomly selected inmates who had no GED or high school education and were released during the same time period. The findings indicated that recidivism was lower as educational level increased (college graduates recidivated lower than high school graduates and both recidivated lower than non high school graduates).

Anderson, Anderson and Schumacker (1988) investigated how many of the 760 detainees who received vocational training while incarcerated obtained employment, especially in areas in which they received vocational training, upon their release. The detainees were divided into four research groups: vocational training, vocational and academic training, academic training, and no vocational or academic training. Vocational and vocational and academic groups had higher employment rates and fewer re-arrests than the other groups. Those who received no education had the highest recidivism rate.

Ramsey (1988) reviewed the relationship between receiving a GED and recidivism. Five groups were used: 175 offenders who received the GED while incarcerated, 175 offenders who did not receive the GED, 100 Adult Basic Education students who received the GED while incarcerated, 100 Adult Basic Education students who did not receive the GED, and 100 who had achieved an 8.0 reading level but were not schooled while incarcerated. Among the GED groups, 22% who received a GED recidivated, while 35% recidivated who had not received a GED. Among the ABE students, 16% who received a GED recidivated, while 33% who did not receive a GED recidivated. Of the 100 individuals who did not receive any schooling, 36% recidivated.

More than 16,000 prisoners from 11 states participated in an investigation conducted by Beck and Shipley (1989). An estimated 62.5% were re-arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within 3 years. Offenders with an 8th grade education or less were rearrested at a rate of 61.9%; high school graduates had a re-arrest rate of 57.4%. Individuals with some college had an even lower re-arrest rate of 51.9%.

Dugas (1990) evaluated the effects of basic literacy tutoring programs (using inmate tutors) on recidivism. Of the inmates who received their GED diplomas while

incarcerated (557), less than 4% returned to the jail compared to a national recidivism rate of 65%.

A study conducted by Porporino and Robinson (1992) involved 1,736 federal offenders who were released in 1988 and monitored for an average of 1.1 years. The effectiveness of an Adult Basic Education program was evaluated through examining recidivism rates. Three groups were studied (program completers, released before completion, and program dropouts). Results indicated that 30.1% of the completers had re-admissions compared to 35.5% of those released before completing and 41.6% for the offenders who had withdrawn.

Gainous (1992) examined graduates of seven Alabama colleges providing correctional education to prisoners. The average recidivism percentage was approximately five percent (5%) for those inmates completing courses during the study period (1987-1991). This figure is significantly below the DOC recidivism figure of 35% for the entire prison population.

A report issued by the Congressional Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency estimates that the national recidivism rate for juvenile offenders is between 60% and 84%. For juveniles involved in quality reading instruction programs, the recidivism rate can be reduced by 20% or more (Brunner, 1993).

Jeffords and McNitt (1993) investigated 1,717 Texas youths who were released between July 1, 1990 and June 30, 1992. While incarcerated, 475 received their GED. The youths were tracked for one year after release. The authors concluded that the recidivism rates of youth attaining a GED were significantly lower than those who did

not. The treatment group had a 41.3% re-arrest rate and a 10.1% re-incarceration rate as compared to a 53.5% re-arrest rate and 19.1% re-incarceration rate for the control group.

An 18-month study by Jenkins, Pendry, and Steurer (1993) utilized 4 subgroups (Adult Basic Education, GED, vocational education and post secondary students) to investigate recidivism. The study concluded that there was a positive and significant benefit of education for students at all levels when compared to similar inmates who did not receive any educational program while incarcerated. The post secondary group contained no recidivists. Other groups also experienced reduced recidivism, increased employability and higher wages.

Harer's (1994) three-year investigation using 1205 releasees showed a strong positive relationship between education and a reduction in recidivism. This study found that the more education the releasee had upon entering the system, the less likely the inmate was to recidivate. The highest recidivism rate was 54.6% for individuals with some high school and the lowest rate was 5.4% for college graduates. Recidivism rates also decreased according to how much education a student received during incarceration. Inmates who did not take education classes recidivated at 44.1%, while individuals who completed at least one course every 6 months of their incarceration recidivated at a rate of 35.5%.

Project LEAD (Life Enrichment and Development), an educational program in Genesee County Jail (Michigan) was investigated by Williams (1996). Project LEAD used a holistic approach to identify inmates whose functional literacy levels were such that it would be difficult for them to secure and maintain jobs. The program also integrated academics, life skills and vocational instruction, tailoring them to meet the

individual needs of participants. Inmates received a minimum of 15 hours of instruction weekly, including a minimum of 5 hours of computer-assisted instruction and 10 hours of classroom instruction, life-skills sessions, and individual academic tutoring. The 1995 performance report showed that the recidivism rate for the 611 Project LEAD participants from September 1993 through September 1995 was 3.5%.

A five-year follow-up study conducted by the Arizona Department of Adult Probation concluded that probationers who received literacy training had a significantly lower re-arrest rate (35%) than the control group (46%). Those who received GED education had a re-arrest rate of 24%, compared to the control group's rate of 46% (Siegel, 1997).

Robinson (2000) investigated Utah's Project Horizon, designed to help inmates prepare for jobs suited to individual needs when they were released. The project's nine-point plan includes inmate assessment, multi-agency collaboration, family involvement and support, research and evaluation, post-release tracking and support, job placement, career skills, basic literacy skills and cognitive problem solving skills. Horizon parolees recidivated 18-20% less than non-participants and found post-release jobs which they consistently tended to keep 89% of the time.

Conclusions

Steurer (1996) suggests that while a direct correlation between educational disadvantage and crime has not been verified, descriptions of prison populations suggest that poor literacy skills and crime are related. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, there is an inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education. The more

education a prisoner receives, the less likely he/she is to be re-arrested or re-imprisoned (Harer, 1994).

The Educational Testing Service (1996) reported that the most common finding of twenty years of research is that inmates exposed to education programs are more likely to be employed and less likely to end up back in prison than non-participants. The reasons for educating the prison population are clear:

Most of the people in America's prisons will eventually be paroled yet two-thirds don't have the literacy skills needed to function in society. It is counterproductive. . .to have people released from prison who are lacking in the most fundamental skills for employment and citizenship. (ETS, 1996, p. 1)

A review of selected investigations indicated that inmates who undergo correctional education average up to a 20% reduction in recidivism from that of the general prison population (Steurer, 1996). The majority of individuals released back into the community will be unskilled, undereducated, and likely to become re-involved in criminal activity. Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor and Campbell (1992) suggested that unless inmates' skills were improved considerably, their prospects for being employed upon release from prison were diminished.

Acknowledging that a high school diploma is the basic academic requirement for almost all entry-level jobs and that persons who function below this level often encounter serious difficulty in obtaining employment and carrying out day-to-day activities and responsibilities, it is almost impossible for a person to get and keep a job in our global, technological society if he/she does not have an education. Once a criminal record, no work experience, and the negative social experience of prison are added to the mix, the

enormous barriers which ex-offenders must overcome become obvious. Each time one barrier can be removed, it becomes easier to become a productive citizen (Correctional Education Connections, 1999).

In the words of former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, “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” (Taylor, 1993, p. 90).

References

Adult Basic Education. (2000). Why do people fail to finish high school? Available: <http://www.io.com/~ellie/4.html>.

Anderson, D., Anderson, S. & Schumacker, R. (1988). Correctional education a way to stay out: Recommendations for Illinois and a report of the Anderson study. Chicago: Illinois Council on Vocational Education.

Beck, A. & Shipley, B. (1989). Recidivism of prisoners released in 1983. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Brunner, M.S. (1993). Reduced recidivism and increased employment opportunity through research-based reading instruction. (NCJ Publication No. 141324). Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

California Dept of the Youth Authority. (1971). Reading and recidivism. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Justice.

Center on Crime, Communities and Culture. (1997). Education as crime prevention: Providing education to prisoners. New York: Center on Crime, Communities and Culture.

- Chaiken, J. (1997). Correctional population in the United States, 1995. NCJ 163916. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Correctional Education Connections. (2000). Giving voices and choices to inmates. Available: <http://www.io.com/~ellie/15.html>.
- Correctional Education Connections. (1999). Giving voices and choices to inmates. Available: <http://www.io.com/~ellie/faqs5.html>
- Dugas, R. (1990). Education program that lowers recidivism. American Jails, 4 (2), 64-72.
- Educational Testing Service. (1996). Nation's prison population growing, but not educationally. Princeton, NJ: ETS.
- Florida Department of Corrections. (1997-98). Inmate admissions: Tested literacy skill levels. Available: http://www.dc.stae.fl.us/pub/annual/9798/stats/ia_lit.html.
- Gainous, F. (1992). Alabama: Correctional education research. Mobile, AL: Department of Postsecondary Education.
- Gehring, T. (n.a.). The history of correctional education. Available: <http://www.ibiblio.org/icea/history.htm>.
- Haigler, K., Harlow, C., O'Connor, P. & Campbell, A. (1992). National adult literacy survey. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/naal92/PrisonSum.html>
- Harer, M. (1994). Recidivism among federal prison releasees in 1987: A preliminary report. Washington DC: Federal Bureau of Prisons.
- Hodges, J., Giuliotti, N. & Porpotage, F. (1994). Improving Literacy Skills of Juvenile Detainees. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Holloway, J. & Moke, P. (1986). Post secondary correctional education: An evaluation of parolee performance. Wilmington, OH: Wilmington College.

Jeffords, C. & McNitt, S. (1993). The relationship between GED attainment and recidivism: An evaluation summary. Austin, TX: Texas Youth Commission.

Jenkins, H., Pendry, J. & Steurer, S. (1993). A post release follow-up of correctional education program completers released in 1990-1991. Baltimore: Maryland State Department of Education.

Lieb, R. (1994). Juvenile offenders: What works? Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Mace, J. (1978). Effect of correctional institutions' education programs on inmates societal adjustment as measured by post-release recidivism. Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell Information & Learning.

Porporino, F. & Robinson, D. (1992). The correctional benefits of education: A follow-up of Canadian federal offenders participating in ABE. Journal of Correctional Education, 43 (2), 92-98.

Project READ. (1978). To make a difference. Silver Spring, MD: READ, Inc.

Ramsey, C. (1988). The value of receiving a general education development certificate while incarcerated in the South Carolina Department of Corrections on the rate of recidivism. Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Corrections.

Robinson, D. (2000). How Utah is reducing recidivism. Journal of Correctional Education, 51, 227-231.

Steurer, S. (1996). Correctional education: A worthwhile investment. Available: <http://novel.nifl.gov/nalld/VOL3NO2.HTM>.

Siegel, G.R. (1997). A research study to determine the effect of literacy and general educational development programs on adult offenders on probation. Tucson, AZ: Adult Probation Department of the Superior Court in Pima County.

Taylor, J.M. (1993, January 25). Pell Grants for prisoners. The Nation. p. 90.
September 20, 2000 Using correctional education data: Issues and strategies. (1997).
Available: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/OCE/IssuesStrategies/ch5.html>

Williams, D. (1996). Project LEAD builds bridges. Corrections Today, 58 (5), 80-83, 91.