

The Impact of Prison Education on Community Reintegration of Inmates: The Texas Case

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Abstract

This article summarizes the results of a series of studies conducted by the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council to evaluate the ability of the Texas prison educational system to improve the educational level of inmates, enhance their employment prospects and lower their recidivism. The studies tracked the prison educational experience and post-prison employment and recidivism of 32,020 inmates released from prison for the first time in 1997-1998. The studies found that inmates with the highest education were more likely upon release to obtain employment, have higher wages and lower recidivism. Educational achievement in prison was associated with an 11% decrease in the two-year recidivism rate of inmates released. However, certain inmates benefited more from prison education than others. Nonreader property offenders who became readers experienced a larger decline in their recidivism rate and a better improvement in their employment prospects than inmates who earned a GED. Prison education can help lower some "natural" barriers to positive community reintegration by strengthening the intellectual, cognitive and life skills possessed by inmates. However, there are still many "societal" barriers to reintegration.

Introduction

Texas has the largest correctional system in the United States with 109 institutions housing 163,190 offenders in 1999; over 131,000 of them housed in traditional prisons (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000; Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2000a; Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2000b). In 1969 Texas created the Windham School District (WSD) to educate its inmates. The district is funded through the Texas Education Agency with a biennial budget of over \$70 million and is overseen by the board of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice administers the Texas probation, prison and parole agencies. A school superintendent administers the day-to-day operations of the WSD. The prison educational system offers academic/literacy, vocational and life skills training programs. The system operates in 88 prison, transfer and state jail units, employs over 1,500 professionals and serves close to 60,000 inmates a year (Windham School District, 1998).

This article summarizes the results of a series of studies conducted in 2000 by the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council (CJPC) evaluating the effectiveness of the WSD and the impact of correctional education on the employment prospects and recidivism of inmates upon re-entry to the community. The CJPC is the state agency that develops policy analyses for state policy makers to use in designing and evaluating criminal and juvenile correctional policies. The council was directed by the governor and legislature in 1999 to conduct these studies as part of a review of the operations of the WSD. 1

Methodology

A series of studies were conducted to determine the impact of: (a) correctional education on educational achievement; (b) educational achievement in prison on recidivism; and (c) educational achievement on employment, wages, and recidivism.² The research

analyzed the prison educational experience and the post-prison employment and recidivism of 32,020 inmates released from prison for the first time in 1997-1998. Only inmates released for the first time (inmates serving a new sentence as opposed to a sentence for a parole violation) were selected to participate in the study in order to isolate the educational gain and achievement made by inmates over one incarceration period. Selecting inmates for the studies released in 1997-1998 allowed for a large group of inmates to have a complete two-year follow-up period in the community to measure their recidivism. Recidivism was defined as the re-incarceration of an inmate in a state facility for a new offense or parole violation during the follow-up period.

The size of the education, employment and recidivism groups tracked varied due to different factors that impacted the size of each study group. Of the 32,020 inmates released, 23,822 were eligible to participate in prison education programs. Of those eligible to participate, 11,866 participated and were tested more than once allowing for educational gain to be measured. To determine employment, 30,207 inmates were tracked one year after release (1,813 inmates of the 32,020 released did not have social security numbers needed for tracking). Employment was determined by matching inmate records with their records of reported wages to the Texas Workforce Commission, the state agency that administers the centralized database of wage records reported by employers. To measure recidivism, 25,980 inmates were tracked during two years to determine how many of them had been re-incarcerated in a state facility. Finally, to measure the impact of educational achievement on recidivism, a group of 8,678 inmates was tracked. This group participated in education programs, was tested more than once and had two years release experience to examine recidivism. Data from Texas centralized computerized criminal records at the state

police agency, and from the prison system, were used to identify recidivists.

Educational Achievement

Inmates eligible for participation in education programs were categorized into three study groups based on their prison entry Educational Achievement (EA) scores at entrance to prison. EA scores are computed using the standardized Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and reflect the grade level at which inmates function at prison entry and at subsequent testing intervals. These study groups were defined as: Functionally Illiterate for inmates with overall EA scores of 5.9 or less (44% of the 23,822 eligible to participate); Nonreaders, a subgroup of inmates in the Functionally Illiterate group with EA reading scores of 3.9 or less (16% of those eligible or 36% of the Functionally Illiterate group); and GED/College Path for inmates with overall EA scores of 6.0 or higher or who had a GED at entrance to prison (56% of those eligible to participate). The GED is a high school equivalency certificate granted by school districts.

Achievement was defined as movement from one group to the next for inmates who participated in education programs. For nonreaders it was to become a reader (to score at least a fourth grade level on a subsequent reading component of the standardized test); for the functionally illiterate it was to become literate (to score at least a sixth grade level on a subsequent composite score of the test); and for inmates in the GED/College Path group, the goal was to successfully complete the GED or participate in college level courses.

Table 1 shows the average gains in EA scores, average number of participation hours and the percentage of inmates achieving the next level for the 11,866 participants tested more than once. The WSD does a good job in moving "borderline" inmates from one functioning level to the next and does so by spending more time on the most difficult to educate population. To improve a grade and a half nonreaders and illiterate inmates required almost double the education time than those inmates in the GED/College Path group. Nonreaders earned an average of 1.5 grades in an average of 894 hours of participation and 46% of them moved from nonreader to readers. Functionally illiterate inmates earned an average of 1.7 grades in an average of 755 hours of participation and 40% of them moved from functionally illiterate to

literate. Inmates in the GED/College Path group earned an average of 1.2 grades in an average of 431 hours of participation and 59% of them earned a GED or participated in college classes.

Table 2 shows the average entry and exit EA scores for inmates who achieved (moved from one group to the next). Those in the GED/College Path group who achieved a GED or went on to participate in college classes had an entry EA score of 8.5 and an exit score of 9.9. On the other hand, nonreaders had an average reading entry EA score of 3.1 and an average exit reading EA score of 5.8 while functionally illiterate inmates had an average of 4.7 and 7.4, respectively.

Table 2: Average Entry and Exit EA Scores for Inmates Who Achieved the Next Level

Group	Average Entry EA Score	Average Exit EA Score
Nonreaders*	3.1	5.8
Illiterate	4.7	7.4
GED/College Path	8.5	9.9

*Entry and Exit EA scores reflect scores on reading portion of TABE only.

There are not enough prison education resources in Texas to educate inmates for longer than two or three years during their incarceration. Overall, the average number of hours of education during an incarceration period for the group studied was 604 with an average gain of 1.5 grades. At the time of the study all inmates who did not have a high-school diploma were able to participate in a primary or secondary education program but priority was given to inmates who were within two to three years of release and had EA scores of less than 6. Inmates participate voluntarily and can refuse participation, with this refusal noted in their record. Inmates can be excluded from participation due to medical, disciplinary or unit location reasons. The participation rate for the group studied was 68%.

It is clear that within the time available to educate inmates during their incarceration, the WSD cannot be expected to educate most nonreaders to a high school graduation level. Therefore, the critical policy question is to identify the best strategy to maximize any potential positive impact of prison education on recidivism and employment. Is it more effective to target the limited

Table 1: Average Gains in EA Scores, Average Hours of Education and Percent Achieving to Next Level for Inmates Tested More Than Once

Group	Average Gains in EA Scores	Average Hours of Participation	Percent Achieving to Next Group
Nonreaders*	1.5	894	46%
Illiterate	1.7	755	40%
GED/College Path	1.2	431	59%

* Gain reflects change in reading portion of TABE only.

education time to inmates who are nonreaders at prison entry or to inmates who functionally literate at prison entry and may achieve a GED in prison?

Education and Recidivism

Two aspects of the relationship between education and recidivism were explored in the evaluations. First, the general relationship between educational level and recidivism was examined (whether the educational level was achieved in prison or not). Second, the relationship between achieving a higher educational level in prison and recidivism was explored. For the second issue, the study statistically controlled for the impact of age and offense on recidivism in analyzing the impact of education on recidivism. Older offenders have a lower recidivism rate than younger offenders, and violent offenders have a lower recidivism rate than property offenders. This relationship holds regardless of education level. For example, almost one-half of the inmates older than 50 in the study had EA scores of less than 6 (46%) but their two-year recidivism rate was 7%. On the other hand, less than one-fourth of inmates age 17 to 25 had EA scores of less than 6 (22%) but their two-year recidivism rate was 20%. To control for the confounding factors of age and offense analyses examining educational achievement and recidivism were conducted by age and offense groupings.

Table 3 shows the general relationship between education and recidivism. As policy makers believe, the higher the education of inmates, the lower their recidivism rate. Inmates released from prison who had an EA score of 9 or more had an 18% lower recidivism rate than those released who had an EA score of 4 or lower (a 14% recidivism rate compared to 17%). Since we know that the WSD can only educate inmates for a limited time during which they gain an average of 1.5 grades, the most relevant question for policy making was the impact of prison educational achievement on recidivism. In general, educational achievement in prison was associated with an 11% decrease in the two-year recidivism rate (16% recidivism rate for achievers compared to 18% for those who did not achieve). However, certain inmates showed a more drastic decline in recidivism than others.

Table 3: Relationship Between Education Level of Inmate at Release and Two-Year Recidivism Rate

EA Score	Two-Year Recidivism Rate
<4.0	17%
4.0 – 5.9	19%
6.0 – 7.4	18%
7.5 – 8.9	16%
9.0+	14%

Table 4 shows the percentage decline in recidivism by younger and older property offenders in the different achievement categories. In general, the largest decline in

Table 4: Percentage Change in Two-Year Recidivism Rate for Inmates in Selected Subgroups

Subgroup/Category	Younger Property (Age <35)	Older Property (Age 35 or Above)
Nonreader to Reader	-37% (30% to 19%)	-55% (33% to 15%)
Illiterate to Literate	-17% (29% to 24%)	-14% (22% to 19%)
GED Path/Earned GED	+31% (16% to 21%)	0% (14% to 14%)

recidivism was found when nonreader property offenders were able to achieve to a reader level, regardless of age. The younger property offenders (less than 35 years of age) had a 37% decline in their two-year recidivism rate while older property offenders (age 35 or older) showed a decline of 55%. The second largest decline occurred for functionally illiterate property offenders who achieved literacy, with younger inmates experiencing a 17% reduction in their two-year recidivism rate and older inmates experiencing a 14% reduction. There was no positive impact on recidivism for inmates who had higher educational levels at prison entry (eligible inmates who earned a GED). For young property offenders who earned a GED, the recidivism rate actually increased. Further analysis using the data collected for the study could not explain why this occurred. For non-property offenders, who tend to have lower recidivism rates to begin with, the impact of achievement on recidivism was less dramatic, but the above relationships were maintained for achievers who entered prison at lower educational levels.

It is important to note that the group of inmates showing the largest positive impact on recidivism (property offenders who became readers or became literate) represented 19% of the 8,678 offenders tracked for this part of the study. Modest reductions in recidivism were found for 36% of participants but no impact on recidivism was found for 45% of the participants. Younger or older non-property offenders who became literate, older property offenders who earned a GED and younger non-property offenders who earned a GED did not experience any decline in recidivism. This may be due to their lower recidivism rates to start with. Therefore, as stated above, the overall reduction in recidivism associated with educational achievement was 11%.

Education, Employment and Recidivism

The relationship between educational level and achievement with employment and recidivism were explored by the studies. Employment was defined as an offender having any wages reported to the central state workforce agency in the first year following release from prison. Overall, of the 30,207 inmates tracked in this part of the study, 70% were employed during their first year of release from prison. This compares to the Texas employment rate of 95.2% for 1998 (the year of tracking). Those who were employed reported average earnings of \$8,788 over an average of 7.4 months of employment during the year. This compares to \$9,880 for the average salary at minimum wage for a year in 1998.

Table 5 shows the overall relationship of education to employment and wages earned. Inmates with the highest educational achievement scores at release from prison were the most likely to be employed and earned the highest wages. Inmates with the highest education had a 31% higher employment rate and earned an average of \$2,442 more a year than inmates who function below a fourth grade level. Still, the inmates in the highest education group had an employment rate that was 36% lower than the state employment rate at the time and earned wages that were slightly higher than an annual minimum wage salary (\$259 higher).

Table 5: Percent of Inmates Employed One Year After Release and Their Reported Annualized Wages by Educational Level

EA Score at Release	Percent Employed One Year After Release	Average Wages Earned
<4.0	57%	\$7,697
4.0 – 5.9	67%	\$7,588
6.0 – 7.4	71%	\$8,128
7.5 – 8.9	74%	\$8,574
9.0+	75%	\$10,139

Table 6 shows how achievement impacted employment and average wages. As with the impact on recidivism, when inmates at lower educational levels achieve to a higher level, their employment prospects improve more than when those with a relatively higher education level at prison entry achieve a higher education. The nonreader who became a reader had an employment rate that was 18% higher than the employment rate of nonreaders. In contrast, those who earned a GED had an employment rate that was 7% higher than those who did not earn a GED. Those who earned a GED already had a higher education level at prison entry and were more likely to be employed than nonreaders.

Table 6: Percent Employed and Average Wages by Achievement Group

Achievement Group	Percent Employed	Average Wages
Stayed Nonreader	56%	\$7,978
Became Reader	66%	\$7,928
Stayed Illiterate	61%	\$7,582
Became Literate	72%	\$8,075
Did not earn GED	72%	\$7,954
Earned GED	77%	\$8,912

Those employed had a 20% lower two-year recidivism rate than those who were unemployed (15% vs. 18%), but those with the highest earnings had the lowest recidivism rate regardless of academic achievement. The recidivism rate of those earning more than \$10,000 a year range from 6% to 9% regardless of educational level compared to the

range of 15% to 26% of those earning less than \$10,000 a year. Therefore, inmates with the highest education level at release tend to have the highest earning potential but regardless of educational level, those earning the most have the lowest recidivism rates.

Conclusion

Inmates in Texas cannot participate in educational programs during their entire incarceration period due to limited educational resources. Such limitations restrict inmates to participate in education programs only two to three years before release. This means that on average, during a period of incarceration, inmates receive 604 hours of education allowing them to improve their level of education by 1.5 grades. Still, prison education seems to improve community reintegration prospects for inmates, in particular for inmates who entered prison with the lowest education levels.

Inmates with the highest education are more likely upon release to obtain employment, earn higher wages and have lower recidivism. Educational achievement in prison was associated with an 11% decrease in the two-year recidivism rate of inmates (16% recidivism rate for achievers compared to 18% for those who did not achieve). However, certain inmates benefited more from prison education than others. Nonreader property offenders who became readers experienced a larger decline in their recidivism rate and a better improvement in their employment prospects than inmates who earned a GED.

Prison education can help lower some "natural" barriers to positive community reintegration by strengthening the intellectual, cognitive and life skills possessed by inmates. The higher the educational level of inmates at release, the better prepared they are for community re-entry and for employment. A review of correctional education studies done by the Center on Crime, Communities and Culture found that education lowers recidivism more effectively than other correctional rehabilitation programs (Center on Crime, Communities, and Culture, 1997). However, a detailed examination using strict scientific scrutiny of major studies of basic education programs and life skill programs "showed some positive effects of program participation on the rate of recidivism" but the effect "varied greatly depending on the particular populations targeted" (Cecil, Drapkin, Mackenzie, and Hickman, 2000: 215).

Finally, there are many "societal" barriers to reintegration. These barriers have been purposely set by society to increase public safety or have developed as a result of the cultural stigma attached to being an ex-convict. Purposely set barriers include background checks before employment, limitations on the type of jobs or licenses that former inmates can hold, restrictions on receiving public assistance (individual convicted of a drug felony, for example, cannot receive certain welfare benefits) as well as limited access to housing, substance abuse and mental health services. These barriers are "formidable challenges to successful reintegration" of inmates according to a recent report on this issue by the Urban Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C. (Urban Institute, 2001:12).

The societal barriers to successful reintegration cannot be overcome easily even by the most educated inmates even though the most educated inmates still have a better chance of reintegration. Although inmates with the highest education had a 31% higher employment rate and earned an average of \$2,443 more a year than the lowest educated inmates, the inmates in the highest education group still had an employment rate that was 27% lower than the state employment rate at the time and earned wages that were slightly higher than an annual minimum wage salary. Even then, the most educated inmates earning the highest wages had the lowest recidivism rates of all inmates released.

Texas policy makers support prison education and the evaluations by the Council helped reinforce this support, however, no attempts were made by policy makers to increase prison education resources to provide for more time in prison to educate inmates. Instead, following the findings of the studies, Texas policy makers directed the administrators of the WSD to "identify younger offenders with the lowest educational levels as a high priority population when allocating educational resources" (Texas Legislature, 2001:III 22).

Endnotes

¹ Nancy Arrigona, Mike Eisenberg and Alma Martinez conducted the council's research. Mike Morrow, superintendent of the Windham School District, and his staff, facilitated the research. The council published four reports detailing the findings summarized here. The reports are listed in the reference section and can be found at www.cjpc.state.tx.us.

² The impact of vocational training and the impact of participation in a pre-release employment program on employment, wages and recidivism were also examined but are not discussed in this article.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Tony Fabelo is the Executive Director of the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council. This is the state justice research and evaluation agency. He advises the state policy makers on plans to improve the juvenile and adult correctional systems.

Historical Vignette

Causes of Delinquency

In his recent book Stephen Duguid explained that "The biological approach [to delinquency and crime] is 'resurgent' because it...has a long tradition, much of which its current advocates...prefer to see forgotten. Nassi and Abramovitz [in their 1976 article "From Phrenology to Psychosurgery and Back Again," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, (4), p. 605] list an impressive array... 'scientific curiosas'... starting in the mid-nineteenth century: Phrenology (1840-70), Criminal atavism-Lombroso-atavistic reversal to the primitive revealed physiologically [around the turn of the 20th century], Heredity and crime-Jukes and Kallikaks-1910-bad gene theory, Crime and mental deficiency-IQ-1920s, Constitutional psychiatry-behavior a function of body structure-1930s, Hormonal imbalance-1930s, Twin studies-1940s, Physique and delinquency-1950s-mesomorphs and delinquency, Neurological disorders-EEGs-1950s, XYZ genes-1960s-extra Y and aggression, Epilepsy and violence-1960s, Brain dysfunction-episodic dyscontrol syndrome-1960s. [to these Duguid added] Testosterone-1970s." (Duguid, S., *Can Prisons Work?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, p. 29). Note-the list is rearranged chronologically.

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