

Research in Review

Bureau of Management Information Services

Division of Planning, Research, Statistics and Grants

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Special Focus on *Correctional Education*

This issue of *Research in Review* includes two special research briefing papers on the evaluation of prison based educational and vocational programs. This issue brings into focus an area of correctional programming that has not received quite as much attention as some more extensively evaluated program domains, such as alcohol and other drug treatment.

The first paper, *Correctional Education Association's (CEA) Three State Recidivism Study*, presents a summary of a major national initiative by CEA over the past several years to evaluate the impact of corrections education programs. CEA received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to study these programs in three states – Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio. They recently released a preliminary report on their research. They find that properly structured and supported prison-based educational and vocational programs can produce marked reductions in recidivism rates. Their report also presents some suggestions for the design and management of such programs. We are pleased to be able to summarize this rather lengthy report for you here. This summary was prepared by Kristofer “Bret” Bucklen, a Pennsylvania Management Associate who is presently doing a rotation in this office.

The second paper, *Educational and Vocational Program Evaluation in the PADOCC*, is an update of the Pennsylvania DOC's own research partnership with CEA, to evaluate educational and vocational programs within the department. The department entered into this partnership during the summer of this year, with funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. This two year project employs a methodology similar to that used for the previous three-state study, and also includes a process evaluation. This paper, by PRS&G's Beth Gardner, provides the reader with an overview of where this project stands, and where it is going. Beth serves as the Project Manager for this evaluation.

Upcoming issues of RIR will include briefing papers on inmate assessment methods, and reviews of articles on inmate work programs. We at RIR hope that you find these pieces to be informative, practical and relevant to your work in corrections.

CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S (CEA) THREE STATE RECIDIVISM STUDY

by

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The *Three State Recidivism Study* was conducted by the Correctional Education Association (CEA) for the United States Department of Education Office of Correctional Education. The purpose of the study was to research the impact of correctional education programming on recidivism and post-release employment. This longitudinal study followed approximately 3,200 inmates who were released from Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio prisons between the summer of 1997 and early winter of 1998. The primary overall finding was that simply attending school while incarcerated reduces the likelihood of re-incarceration by nine percentage points. Translated into monetary savings, this reduction in re-incarceration means that every dollar spent on education returns more than two dollars to the citizens of these three states.

The study was based on eight preliminary hypotheses. The researchers hypothesized that participation in correctional education programs would result in reduced rates of re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 1-3). Furthermore, for educational participants who did recidivate, the researchers suggested that they would commit less serious offenses when compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 4). The researchers also hypothesized that post-release participation in pro-social activities and behavioral compliance with parole/release conditions would be higher for correctional education participants compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 5,6). Finally, the researchers suggested that participation in correctional education programs would result in higher rates of employment and higher wages for participants when compared to non-participants (Hypothesis 7,8).

With a research design such as the one employed in this study (quasi-experimental), it is always important that a "treatment" group and a "non-treatment" group are relatively comparable on all major variables that may affect a hypothesized outcome (with the exception of the control variable). In this case, it was important that the educational "participant" group and the "non-participant" group were relatively comparable on all variables that might impact the level of recidivism and employability so that any resulting difference in recidivism rates and employability between the two groups could be attributed to educational participation status and not to other variables. In order to ensure comparability between the participant group and the non-participant group, statistical tests were conducted for several key characteristics to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups on important variables that might impact recidivism and employment results (eg. age, race, prior arrest history, prior employment, marital status, etc.). The two groups were not significantly different on a number of key variables. For the small number of variables where they did significantly differ, the difference almost always put the education participants at a greater risk of recidivism than the non-participants. Overall, the researchers concluded that the two groups were sufficiently equivalent to support inferences about how

correctional education participation affects recidivism.

Five data sources were used to gather information on the cohort of offenders participating in this study. An inmate pre-release survey, comprised of sixty questions, solicited information pertinent to recidivism factors and participation in institutional educational programming. A second instrument was developed to collect institutional/educational information from administrative records on each inmate including the crime and sentence length of current incarceration, basic demographic information, number of felony arrests and convictions, major institutional infractions, programming and employment while incarcerated, and prerelease information. Some of this same information was gathered in the pre-release survey but was collected again through institutional records to crosscheck for accuracy. In Maryland and Ohio, a parole/release officer survey was administered to collect data on the types of pro-social activities an offender participated in, the level of offender compliance with parole/release conditions, and information on post-release re-offending. This survey was not administered in Minnesota due to the complex structure of its parole system. The fourth source of data was each inmate's criminal history maintained by each state's crime information center. The criminal history data provided information on: (1) re-arrest, re-conviction, re-incarceration, (2) time to re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration, and (3) the type of re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration offenses. Finally, employment information was gathered from the Federal Department of Labor. Because of record-keeping, only Maryland and Minnesota were able to participate in this portion of the study. Also, only a limited amount of information on employment was available from the Department of Labor.

The *Three State Recidivism Study* resulted in several significant findings that can be used to guide policy and legislation within the three participating states. First of all, the background characteristics alone highlighted several needs. For example, given the low literacy levels of both the participant and non-participant groups, more opportunities for basic education and GED preparation should be provided to inmates. The fact that a significant number of study participants had children under the age of 18 suggests that there is a need for increased parenting instruction, financial management, and family reunification efforts. Also, given the erratic and unstable employment history of the study participants, policy-makers should pay closer attention to vocational education/training and job readiness courses.

The most important finding of this study was the confirmation of the first three initial hypotheses. The first three hypotheses stated that correctional education participants would have lower recidivism rates as measured by re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration. In all three cases, the hypotheses were supported for all three states and the results were statistically significant. The most significant difference between the participant and non-participant groups was for re-incarceration rates. Correctional education participants had a three year recidivism rate of 22 percent, compared with 31 percent for non-participants, a difference of nine percentage points. While recidivism rates were significantly different between the two groups, the fourth hypothesis, which stated that the type of re-arrest offenses for educational participants would be less serious, was not confirmed. Educational participants committed slightly more violent, traffic, and probation/parole violation offenses and non-participants committed slightly more property,

drug/alcohol and misdemeanor offenses; the two groups did not differ significantly in any re-arrest offense categories.

The fifth hypothesis, that the participant group would have higher rates of parole condition compliance, was not confirmed. Reporting to parole officers, revocation actions, and post-release employment was similar for both groups. However, based on recent research documenting parole failure, both groups had unusually low parole revocation rates (1.6 percent of participants and 2.7 percent of non-participants). The hypothesis that participants would demonstrate greater participation in post-release pro-social behaviors (Hypothesis 6) was partially confirmed. Participants were slightly more likely to participate in post-release pro-social behaviors such as education/training, substance abuse treatment and counseling.

According to the employment data gathered from the Department of Labor, both groups experienced surprisingly high rates of legal employment (77 percent for participants and 81 percent for non-participants). While non-participants had a slightly higher rate of legal employment, the difference was not statistically significant and therefore the hypothesis that participants would have higher rates of employment (hypothesis 7) could not be properly tested. The final hypothesis that participants would have higher wages was confirmed for all three years. The difference was modest, however, and only the difference in the first year was statistically significant.

The researchers involved in this project identified three major limitations to the study. First of all, the preferred type of research design for such a study (an experimental design) was not possible since researchers cannot randomly assign inmates to a treatment and control group. Administrators of correctional programming commonly perceive an ethical obligation to provide treatment where needed, and do not wish to assign them to a control group that receives no treatment. The second limitation of this study is that the results cannot be generalized to states beyond Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio because certain factors such as statutory definitions of crime, sentencing guidelines, and employment data may be different for other states. The third limitation is that the researchers were not able to ascertain with any confidence whether or not the length of time spent in education programs made a difference. This limitation was due to the inadequacy of the education records maintained by the three states being studied. The authors note that since the study was conducted all three states have improved their automated record keeping systems.

The *Three State Recidivism Study* confirmed that investments in correctional education programs are a wise and informed public policy with important fiscal and policy implications. While the authors cautioned against generalizing the results of this study to other states outside of the study, it is encouraging that the recidivism results were similarly strong in all three states. Unfortunately, however, the study does not provide a clear definition of what is included under the label of “education programs”. The primary conclusion of this study is that attending school reduces the likelihood of re-incarceration by nine percentage points but does “attending school” only include basic GED-level educational courses such as reading and mathematics or does it include vocational tech programs, post-secondary education, and “life skills” courses? Further research is needed to determine what types or combinations of education programs are most effective.

EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE PADO

by

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In the Spring of 2001, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections began working with the CEA, supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), to evaluate the Department's educational and vocational programs. An advisory committee comprised of department staff from central office and various institutions oversee this project. This evaluation project includes two primary phases: a process evaluation and an outcome evaluation. The process evaluation involved gathering information on the current program content and delivery system of the Department's education programs.

CEA began the process evaluation by mailing surveys to each institution. Each school principal was responsible for completing an *Administrative Staff Survey* and distributing and collecting copies of the *Correctional Instructional Staff Survey* to all educational and vocational teaching staff. Completed surveys were mailed directly to CEA offices. CEA was extremely pleased with the 100% response rate from principals and over 85% response rate from instructional staff.

Following a review of the survey responses, as well as the information contained in selected Proposed Education Program (PEP) reports, CEA scheduled two-day institutional site visits in September and October. SCI's Camp Hill, Huntingdon, Greensburg, Dallas, Mahanoy and Cambridge Springs were host sites for these meetings.

On the first day of the site visits, CEA consultants and Department staff met to discuss the institutions' current educational and vocational programming. The evaluation team also met with small groups of inmates at each institution to ascertain their involvement in, and their level of satisfaction with, current educational and vocational programming.

During the second day of the site visits, two focus groups met with the evaluation team to discuss their institution's educational and vocational programs. These focus groups included staff from fourteen neighboring institutions in addition to staff from the host sites. The morning focus group consisted of Principals and Corrections Classification and Program Managers (CCPM's) and the afternoon focus group included educational and vocational teachers and instructors. All in all, more than 117 department staff participated in the site visit segment of the process evaluation. This included representatives from 20 institutions, the Bureau of Corrections Education and the Division of Planning, Research, Statistics and Grants.

CEA is synthesizing the feedback they received from the site visits and is preparing a report on the process evaluation component of this evaluation project. We expect a preliminary draft report within the next month or so.

The second component of this evaluation project is the outcome evaluation, which is currently underway. Twenty-seven department staff members from 15 institutions have been trained to facilitate the delivery of a pre-release survey to inmates who are being paroled or who complete their maximum sentence.

The pre-release survey is the same one utilized by CEA in their *Three State Recidivism Study*. The survey is ten pages long and consists of 60 multiple choice questions, with an additional sheet for written responses to multi-part questions. All completed surveys are mailed directly to CEA for analysis.

Original plans called for the pre-release surveys to be completed by the end of December, but have been extended to the end of February 2002 due to a delay in obtaining the necessary information at each institution. The goal of collecting 1,500 completed surveys will provide CEA with a release cohort that is suitable for their evaluation needs. CEA will prepare a report detailing the impact of educational and vocational programming on 500 inmates in six areas: student progress; student retention; institutional behavior; success in other institutional programs; institutional work performance; and positive involvement in other institutional activities. CEA then plans to follow up with the remaining 1000 inmates via parole and other sources to determine if they obtain employment, violate parole, are re-arrested or re-incarcerated. The grant from PCCD will allow CEA to follow-up for approximately 12 months after release. If funds become available, the department would like to seek support to extend the follow-up for two additional years, which would meet current research standards of three years post-release follow-up for recidivism studies.

The completion of this evaluation project will provide the Department with a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses in the provision of educational and vocational programming. Additionally, because the CEA already has completed the *Three State Recidivism Study* in Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio, the Department will be able to benchmark its programming against the results reported in the previous study.



Mission Statement

"Our mission is to protect the public by confining persons committed to our custody in safe, secure facilities, and to provide opportunities for inmates to acquire the skills and values necessary to become productive law-abiding citizens; while respecting the rights of crime victims."