

# The success of inmate reentry programs



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What can correctional facilities offer to inmates to help those that are about to be released from prison keep from being rearrested. Most inmates who are released have no job, money, or a place to live. The same pressures and temptations that landed ex-offenders in prison are present in the environment that they often go back to. The key elements of successful re-entry into society after prison are finding and keeping a lucrative job, finding a decent place to live, and finding a mentor to help guide them in the right direction. Most of the communities that former inmates are released into are most often impoverished neighborhoods that do not contain the support that is key to the success of reentry into society from correctional facilities. Re-entry programs offered by correctional facilities can help smooth the transition, but they are not always successful. This paper discusses the successes and often the failures of the inmate re-entry programs.

### The Success of Inmate Re-Entry Programs

Work release and educational programs were created throughout the federal prison systems as an effort to provide ex-offenders with an opportunity for preparation for release back into the community and to be productive contributors to society. Are these programs successful at their attempts, or is it a waste of government and taxpayer's money? In order to determine whether work programs are successful, considerations of an evaluation deploying proper statistical methods require a good number of people in the study. A possible way to gauge former inmates may be to question and get information and ask questions during visits to parole officers. In reality, however, attempts to gather self-reported crime in this fashion has the possibility of yielding poor results. Former inmates reluctantly make

confessions of crimes. Moreover, working through a parole office increases the difficulty of guaranteeing the anonymity of research subjects.

More than 700, 000 people are released from state and Federal prison annually while another 9 million cycle through local jails over and over. Statistics provided by the Office of National Drug Control Policy indicate that more than two-thirds of state prisoners are rearrested within three years of their release and half are re-incarcerated(Caporizzo, 2011). More crime, more victims, and more pressure on an already overburdened criminal justice system are named as the causes for recidivism.

Recidivism can be defined in different ways and in different contexts. A generally used meaning might be a return to crime. It is almost impossible to truly gauge the rate of “ return to crime’ for any group of former prisoners because of the difficulty to locate individuals.

The Administration’s National Drug Control Strategy supports comprehensive change within the criminal justice system stating that, “ promoting a combined public health/public safety approach to stop the all-too-common cycle of arrest, incarceration, release, and re-arrest of prior offenders (Dryden, 1975).”

The cost for incarceration stretches far beyond the prison walls, meals provided to inmates daily, and the guards who potentially put themselves in harm’s way each day. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. It costs over \$26, 000 to incarcerate one federal prisoner for one year — more than the average cost of one year of college education. American taxpayers spend over \$60 billion each year on prisons.

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Half of all federal prisoners and one in five state prisoners are there for drug related offenses which are usually a nonviolent. Men who have served time in prison earn 40 percent less each year than men who have not been in prison. One in every 28 children under age 18 has a parent in prison. Long mandatory sentences have led to overcrowded, unsafe prisons that are less cost-effective than alternatives like treatment and drug courts (Caporizzo, 2011).

Reentry programs are designed to assist incarcerated individuals with a successful transition to their community after they are released. President Obama's has a strategy called the National Drug Control Strategy that calls for supporting post-incarceration reentry efforts by assisting former inmates in job placement, facilitating access to drug-free housing, and providing other supportive services. Obama's National Drug Control Strategy is participating in the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, first convened in January 2011 by Attorney General Eric Holder who states, " The Council's main purpose is to make communities safer, assisting those returning from prison and jail in becoming productive, tax-paying citizens and saving taxpayer dollars by lowering the direct and collateral costs of incarceration (Caporizzo, 2011)."

The access to college courses, another program that is offered to inmates, has been available to increasingly large numbers of prisoners since the early seventies. Public funds support such educational programs. As part of governmental criminal justice policy, one explicit aim of this prison higher education has been to reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior among those released from prison. Have prison college programs reduced

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recidivism? When examination of follow-up data from matched comparison groups that have not received programs was compared to groups that have received the programs, little difference from the treatment was often seen. It was concluded that correctional rehabilitation programs were by and large ineffective in reducing recidivism.

There are two theories that attempt at explaining why former inmates return to prison. The first of this theory is the “opportunity theory”. It claims that crime derives from a person’s lack of opportunity for legitimate economic advancement. The expectation that prisoners who earn college credits will get better jobs after release than they would otherwise, according to this theory, justifies prison college classes. Some criminologists, observing the slight impact social programs have had on recidivism rates, lack confidence in opportunity theory to do much about the crime problem.

“Moral development” is the second theory that has been used to justify prison college programs. According to this view, a prisoner becomes more generally honest by studying and discussing the moral dilemmas encountered in liberal arts courses. Quite apart from the intervening cause of getting a good job, thus, the theory of moral development sees higher education operating directly on personality to produce law-abiding behavior (Lockwood, p. 140).

It was found that participation in work-release or college programs had no effect on the length of time until return to criminal activity, the percentage of men who return to criminal activity, or the frequency of participation in criminal activity after release from prison. However, there was a highly

significant effect on the seriousness of criminal activity. Both the average length of sentence received and the length of the most serious sentence are significantly lower for men who participated in a work-release program. Men who were not on work release were found to have a much greater probability of returning to prison for a felony than those men who participated in a work-release program.

The effectiveness of work release on providing work experience and a stable job record is supported by the greater work stability, lower unemployment rate, and higher wages of men who have been on a work-release program when compared with men who have not been on the program. Greater work stability is associated with a decline in the seriousness of criminal activity. 16 percent of the men who had been on work release claimed it helped them after prison by providing a job reference, and 25 percent said the work experience they gained helped them significantly after release. It was also found that there was little objective support for attributing the effectiveness of work release to increased family stability. Being married and having dependents also has no significant association with the seriousness of criminal activity. Subjectively, men who had been on work release found the ability it gave them to support their dependents while in prison to be one of the most important benefits of the program. There was little objective support for believing that work release provided new job skills. Most work-release jobs have a low skill level. The skill level of the first job after release for former work release inmates were significantly higher than the skill level of the first job obtained by men who had not been on a work-release program.

The fact that 39 percent of the men had been on a work-release program remained on their work-release jobs at least for a short period after release from prison supports the effectiveness of work-release in providing a job after prison. However, staying on one's work-release job does not appear to be significantly related to the seriousness of criminal activity. The effect of work release in providing a man with money on release is rather interesting. Subjectively, men who had been on work release found the money it provided them on release to be the single most important benefit of the work-release program. The project had no objective measure of the effect of contacts with the free community on postrelease performance. However, 30 percent of the men who had been on work release said that their experience eased their adjustment.

According to the findings by Lynn Goodstein (1980), "work-release is a successful program: men who have been on the work-release program commit less serious criminal offenses after release from prison." Although the determinate sentence is generally discussed as a unified concept, it appears to be comprised of two independent factors which can be considered separately—equity in sentencing and predictability of release. Evidence from psychological research on stress and intrinsic motivation is presented to substantiate claims by critics of the indeterminate sentence that it results in heightened inmate-anxiety and poor program-performance. Ensuring predictability of release is an important objective which is likely to result in benefits for both inmates and the correctional system as a whole (Goodstein, p. 365).

A Panel on Research on Rehabilitative Techniques of the National Research Council drew a random sample of the cases that Lipton, Martinson, and Wilks examined. They carried out an independent analysis of these data (Sechrest, White, and Brown, 1979). Even though the Panel found the research methods used in these evaluations so inadequate that only a few studies allowed for sure conclusions, they did make this statement in 1979:

“ We do not now know of any program or method of rehabilitation that could be guaranteed to reduce the criminal activity of released offenders...but the quality of the work that has been done and the narrow range of options explored militates against any policy reflecting a final pessimism. (Sechrest, White, and Brown, 1979, p. 34).” This still holds true today.

Since 1979, when the National Research Council Panel carried out its work, prison higher education programs have proliferated. But given the conclusion of the panel, and the results of the Martinson Report, why should one think that prison higher education will reduce recidivism any more than other programs that have failed? In considering this question one can look to at least two theories of crime. These propositions, if true, could justify the cost to the public of providing college education to imprisoned offenders as a rational crime prevention measure.