

**An Examination of Academic, Policy and  
Social Considerations of Correctional  
Education and Offender Recidivism:  
Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Criminology**

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## **Abstract**

*There has been a serious lack of examination of academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism. The very few studies that have attempted to carryout such examination, have done so in passing without much attention to academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism. They seemed to stop at a point where a more detailed examination of academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism is needed. To fill this gap, an examination of academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism is the focus of this study. An examination of these considerations may be too important and too costly to ignore in 21st Century-criminology.*

## **An Examination of Academic, Policy and Social Considerations of Correctional Education and Offender Recidivism**

### **Theories of Individual Change**

Correctional education programs, especially at the post-secondary level, are designed on the notion that a degree of inmate rehabilitation can be achieved through them, i.e., that inmates' exposure to such education is a contributory factor to lowered recidivism. The theories that suggest this notion include, but are not limited to, moral development theory, social psychological development theory, and opportunity theory (Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Ubah, 2001). These theories are also described as "optimistic perspective," and central to them, as they are articulated by penologists, criminologists, sociologists, educators, and public figures, is the assumption that, correctional educational programs can enhance the successful reintegration of certain individual inmates from the society of captives into the general society (Johnson, 2002; Petersilia, 2000; Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958). These optimistic theories can also be referred to, as theories of individual change. Theories of individual change focus directly on the individual as the point of analysis, and only indirectly on the larger society. In other words, responsibility for recidivism - reduction, as an outcome of inmate education, depends to the individual inmates.

The questions then are, what is in prison-based education that reduces offender recidivism - Is it the building of moral character, self-esteem, and self concept? Can one argue that it provides a new perspective on life with an attendant re-orientation of action? Does it function as a coping mechanism? Is it the know-how and new interests it provides? Does it function as a credential in the labor market? etc. The theoretical approaches that address some of these questions have been discussed by (Ubah and Robinson, 2002; Ubah, 2001), among other authors.

It is unfortunate that most studies of correctional education and offender recidivism have focused on the debate over whether prison-based education works or does not work (e.g., Anderson, 1981; 1991; Jenkins et al, 1995; Matisoff, 1974; Porporino and Robinson, 1992; Schumacker et al, 1990; Holloway and Moke, 1986; Martinson, 1974; Sullivan, 1990), while, to a great degree, they have ignored the need for an examination of academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism. An examination of such considerations is imperative because, among other things, it would enable us to have a better understanding of the academic debate over prison-based education and offender recidivism; it would help policy makers to make critical decisions, about whether the programs should continue to exist, and if so, how they should be structured and funded. It would shed insight on some of the social issues concerning correctional education and offender recidivism, such as, the elimination of prison-based education Pell Grants. Thus, this study is specifically concerned with four major questions: 1) What are the academic considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism? 2) What are the policy considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism? 3) What are the social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism? And 4) What are the lessons learned from this examination for the 21st Century-criminology?

### **Considerations of Correctional Education Programs**

Any assessment of the usefulness of correctional education programs must address its academic, policy and social considerations as well as the lessons learned, and the importance of such lessons, in 21st Century-criminology.

#### *The Academic Considerations*

According to literature, the debate whether prison-based education works or does not work continues to divide scholars. Some argue that, to a considerable extent, such education

accomplishes its purpose, namely, significant rate of recidivism reduction (Anderson, 1981; 1991; Jenkins et al, 1995; Matisoff, 1974; Porporino and Robinson, 1992; Schumacker et al, 1990), while others think that it does not work (Kettering, 1965; Martinson, 1974; Sullivan, 1990). Central to this debate are two contradictory perspectives on prison-based education: a) an optimistic view stressing the promise and value of correctional education; and b) a pessimistic reaction to its perceived ineffectiveness (Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Ubah, 2001). This author has rigorously and critically attempted to examine the issues of correctional education in order to articulate its considerations. The literature on whether prison-based education works or does not work is not conclusive. However, a scrutiny of statistical association of empirical aspects of literature on correctional education and offender recidivism, has strongly suggested the conclusion that it is a spurious relationship (Ubah, 2001). A relationship between two variables is said to be spurious when both variables are dependent on a third variable (Agresti and Finlay, 1997; Bohrnstedt and Knoke, 1994; Mckean and Byers, 2000; Mohr, 1995).

The questions then are as follows: A) Should the conclusions, as they are represented in the literature of sociology, criminology, criminal justice and public policy end the debate over prison education; and B) Do they suggest that correctional education programs in other institutions do not work and, as such, no further research should be conducted on the subject? The answers to both of these questions are clearly in the negative (Ubah, 2001). It is the view of this author that, the conclusions have shed some light on the ongoing debate, yet there is a need for more studies to be conducted on the subject, within and across the United States of America.

In contrast to most investigations on the subject, that used only recidivism rates as a criterion in determining the impact of correctional education on previously incarcerated and released offenders, it is important that future studies should utilize more than one criterion in

assessing the impact of correctional education programs on postrelease success of ex-offenders (Anderson, 1981; Ubah, 2001). This approach would enable us to carry out a much more in-depth analysis of the relationship between correctional education and rates of offender recidivism. In order for future studies to carry out in-depth analysis of the relationships between correctional education and offender recidivism, the utilization of several criteria is imperative. By doing so, future studies would enable us to have less narrow insights of the impact of correctional education on offender recidivism.

### *The Policy Considerations*

It is important to understand that assessment of the impact of correctional education on recidivism rates among parolees whom it serves is imperative for effective correctional planning and programming. As Mandel (1963:2) states:

Without the studies on recidivism it is impossible to compare the efficacy of correctional programs among correctional agencies and institutions. With the studies it becomes feasible to focus attention upon those programs which appear to have the greatest salutary effects upon the offenders whom they reach.

In line with Mandel's suggestions, Robinson (1990) articulated what I think encompasses a great deal of the potential policy considerations of studies of correctional education and offender recidivism. He stresses that studies on recidivism will aid policy makers and correctional administrators in making critical decisions about whether rehabilitative programs should exist and how they should be structured; they will aid policy makers and correctional administrators in identifying effective and viable rehabilitative programs; and they will enable them to focus attention upon the programs which appear to have the greatest efficacy upon the offenders they serve. Study of these programs may also assist correctional administrators in identifying variables that serve as predictors of inmate success in the programs and predictors of successful program utilization.

### *The Social Considerations*

Central to the social considerations of post-secondary correctional education on offender recidivism are (a) the importance of college correctional education programs, beyond their effect on offender recidivism, and (b) the recognition of the insight elimination of prison-based education Pell Grants provides, for our understanding of prisons. Although these two themes are different, somehow, they interweave.

In 1993/1994 Congress eliminated Pell Grants for prison-based post-secondary education programs, on the ground that the provision of educational programs for inmates in correctional institutions is not effective in achieving perceived goals measured in terms of recidivism (Tewksbury et al, 2000; Warner, 1999; Tracy et al, 1998; Tewksbury, 1996; Morphonios and Wilson, 1991; Sullivan, 1990). However, education in prison is nonetheless valuable for a number of reasons (Johnson, 2002; Petersilia, 2000; Hobler, 1999; Taylor and Tewksbury, 1998; Ness and Strong, 1997; Ross, 1985). To begin with, the value attached to education in the free society as well as in prisons is strong. For instance, Welch (1996) asserts that correctional education programs continue to draw support from mainstream citizens essentially because in and of itself education is valued in our society in general. For one thing, educational and vocational programs do not only develop practical skills, but also respond to the idea that any person has the right to be educated. Furthermore, they are our only hope for instilling and reinforcing a sense of the work ethic central to our culture's view of self-reliance and a satisfying life (Sweetland, 1996). This notion was well stressed in Lejins' (1971:26) work, in which he wrote:

Since education is as good an indication as any of the likelihood of one's success in contemporary society, it seems essential to improve prison education programs if prison inmates are going to be provided with academic skills necessary to give them a realistic second chance at

becoming constructive members in community life. This claim about the value of education in prison becomes more compelling when one considers that about ninety-five percent of all offenders currently behind bars will eventually be released into the larger community where they will have to fend for themselves (Petersilia, 2003; Rentscher, 2001; Warner, 1999; Jancic, 1998; Tootoonchi, 1990). Thus Petersilia (2003:2) asserts that:

Inmates have always been released from prisons, and officials have long struggled with their reintegration. But the current situation is decidedly different. The sheer number of releasees dwarfs anything in history; the need of parolees appear more serious; and the corrections system retains few rehabilitation programs.

Most research literature on the subject has suggested no simple connection between attainment of correctional education while incarcerated and successful reintegration into the larger community. They suggest that the association between educational attainment while in prison and the lives of incarcerated persons when they return to the larger community is not satisfactorily captured by one simple measure of success or failure (Jenkins et al, 1995; Robinson, 1990; Anderson, 1981). The standard of recidivism alone casts doubt on the need for the continuation and improvement of the funding of correctional education programs in our penal systems (Linden et al, 1984; Anderson, 1981; Martinson, 1974).

On the other hand, research has also shown that education programs in prison serve some important institutional functions, such as job creation, control mechanism, and operational maintenance (Johnson, 2002; Taylor and Tewksbury, 2002; Colvin, 1992; McKelvey, 1977; Parsons and Giddens, 1976; Sykes, 1958).

The job creation aspect of education programs in prison serves an institutional function in the sense that it provides jobs for some educators who may be employed to teach inmates in various academic and vocational fields. These programs also may serve as incentives which prison



authorities can use to control inmates toward becoming more conforming to the rules and regulations of the penitentiary. Access control to participation in educational programs provides prison authorities with a form of positive sanctions which is crucial for maintaining order in prisons (Cripe, 1997; Colvin, 1992).

In addition, they may serve the function of keeping inmates busy instead of being idle day-in and day-out. As people usually say, "an idle mind is potentially the devil's workshop." And as we know, idleness is against the prevailing ethic. This Puritanism-derived ethic shapes most of our correctional ideologies and practices (Johnson, 2002; Ness and Strang, 1997; McKelvey, 1977; Parsons and Giddens, 1976). Thus, correctional education may likely inhibit some crime in prison as well as offer a viable alternative for inmates who may be courageous and motivated enough to take advantage of the educational opportunity behind bars in their efforts toward turning their lives around. This in turn could enable a certain number of them to "go straight" by becoming productive citizens, when released from the society of captives into the larger society (Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958).

While conservative politicians, as well as the public seem concerned about tax dollars used to educate inmates, we should also realize that inmates' education has some crime preventive effects. The investment is a form of control mechanism. This is because, without educational programs in prison to occupy inmates' time, alleviate the degree of prisonization and degradation they go through (Irwin, 1985; Garfinkel, 1956), and to reinforce their motivation and hope to go straight while at the same time controlling them by keeping them busy, inmates are left to use their resources and imagination in non-productive or counter-productive ways (Taylor and Tewksbury, 2002; Eichenthal and Blatchford, 2001).

Central to the second theme regarding the social considerations of prison education is that this study enables us to understand and appreciate how recent developments or changes in the larger society (i.e., the elimination of prison-based Pell Grants by Congress) have affected prison-based college education programs and offender recidivism. This understanding is important for sociology and criminology alike because all the technocratic language notwithstanding, it clearly shows how the life permitted to those inhabiting "total institutions" reflect the shifting values of society-at-large. In his analysis, Goffman describes prisons as "places of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (Goffman, 1961:xiii). But there is a point to this round, and it is a reflection of the larger society in which prisons are situated. That is to say that prisons are organizations in action, in dynamic relationships with their environmental conditions such as the political, legislative, judicial, economic, and social milieu (Warner, 1999; Colvin, 1992; Farrington, 1992; Zucker, 1987; Jacobs, 1977; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976). As the recent loss of Pell Grants for prison-based college education programming has shown, various external environmental forces and pressures can have profound negative effects on the internal social systems of a prison.

### **Lessons for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Justice Administration**

Several lessons can be learned from this investigation. The first lesson that can be learned from this examination is that prison-based education programs were intended, not only to provide inmates with skills or credentials they need in their attempts to make smoother transition into the larger society, but also to help in motivating and controlling inmates in systematic ways (Eichenthal and Blatchford, 2001; Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958; Garfinkel, 1956). That being the case, the challenge facing policy makers, correctional practitioners, and the general public as regards to

correctional education programming is for us to be rational enough about the functions of educational programs in our penal systems. Although the major intended function of prison-based educational programs, i.e., its significant reduction on offender recidivism, is not conclusive as suggested by literature on the subject, yet other functions of the programs (such as those pointed out in this study) should be taken into consideration in making critical decisions about whether the programs should continue to exist, and if so, how they should be structured and funded.

Thus, instead of the wasteful and pointless ways most prisoners do their time, we should encourage them to do their time constructively and maturely by getting them to "learn their lessons" (Johnson, 2002; Halstead, 1999).

One of the important ways by which inmates can learn their lessons constructively and maturely is through correctional education programs partially designed within the framework of the principles of "restorative justice" (Strang and Braithwaite, 2001; Clear and Karp, 1999; Halstead, 1999; Bats, 1999; Eggleston, 1999; Ness and Strang, 1997). Thus, Halstead (1999:42) argues that "restorative justice fits perfectly with the rehabilitative ideal because it concentrates on the harms of crime and corrections rather than the rules that have been broken ..."

The principles of restorative justice would enable us to move beyond the status quo upon which most of our correctional education programs are currently based, to an idea and philosophy that would help us in our attempts toward addressing the problems of crime and our penal systems for the betterment of the victims, offenders, and the general public (Clear and Karp, 1999). This philosophy is based on the premise of showing inmates how they are responsible for the consequences of their choices.

Instead of embarking on an "imprisonment binge" (Austin and Irwin, 2001; Bohm and Haley, 2002) which puts offenders (even the nonviolent ones) where there is violence all around

them, we should rather increasingly divert them into community programs where they can use practical nonviolent options to solve their problems and face their responsibilities (Clear and Cole, 2003; Petersilia, 2003; Clear and Karp, 1999).

## **Conclusions**

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this investigation. First, most of the studies on the subject were concerned with the debate over whether prison-based education works or does not work, while to a great degree, they ignored the need for an examination of academic, policy and social considerations of correctional education and offender recidivism. In this project however, the author has made an explicit examination of academic, policy and social considerations of prison-based education and offender recidivism.

Second, Martinson's "nothing works" verdict on correctional education is the most cited criminological literature on the subject. The question of whether Martinson was right or wrong in his conclusion that nothing works, is not clearly established by literature examined for this study. However, it is the author's conclusion that the findings of empirical studies found in the course of examining literature for this project lend support to the idea that participation in prison-based education apparently serves to differentiate the more successful parolees from the unsuccessful ones (Ubah, 2002).

Third, it must be noted that the association between correctional attainment while in prison and the lives of formally incarcerated persons when they return to the larger community is not satisfactorily captured by one simple measure of success or failure. For this reasons, multiple criteria other than only recidivism rates will be the right step in the right direction.

Fourth, it is the conclusion of this research that any assessment of the usefulness of correctional education and offender recidivism, must account for its considerations, which include

but are not limited to social, academic and policy considerations.

Fifth, the arguments and conclusions in this research do not, in any way, hold the illusion that all the ills of crime and criminals would be eradicated by correctional education. Rather, they should be understood as some of the viable options through which we can make a difference in our attempts toward addressing the problems of crime and our penal systems in the 21st century-criminology.

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