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Literacy and Criminality

Nathan Shinabarger

When the prisons across the United States are surveyed, a common theme emerges. It transcends race, gender, age, and is perhaps the strongest common thread between the majority of criminals: a lack of literacy. Some argue this lack of literacy leads to high rates of recidivism, and increased crime instead of being able to help rehabilitate an offender. Recidivism, or the tendency of a criminal to reoffend or relapse into crime, places a huge burden on the Criminal Justice System. Crime is estimated to cost the United States over \$1 trillion each year (Anderson, 1999), and recidivism is a massive part of what causes such a heavy burden on all taxpayers financially. Perhaps the even greater burden is the communities that must suffer through criminals who continually reoffend, stirring up disorder and unrest. Once recognizing the link between illiteracy and crime, the impacts of literacy programs in correctional facilities become significant and the implementation of such programs becomes clear.

Researchers have long suspected that youth in the criminal justice system display a significant link between criminality and illiteracy. Evaluating this link, the Criminal Justice Initiative (1997) noted that “young people who ... exhibit poor literacy skills are disproportionately found within the criminal justice system.” The problem is not solely in the fact that youth often lack proper literacy when entering the criminal justice system, but that their education, and thereby their literacy, rarely improves when they are released, predisposing them to more crime. The Criminal Justice Initiative (1997) also notes this saying, “In most cases, once juveniles are incarcerated, even for a short time, their line to education is forever broken. Most juvenile offenders aged 16 and older do not return to school upon release or graduate from high school.” Ultimately, they conclude that “there is a strong link between low levels of education and high rates of criminal activity, and one of the best predictors of adult criminal behavior is involvement with the criminal justice

system as a juvenile.” The system is so broken, many juvenile offenders remain criminals even as they continue their adult lives. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a link between adult literacy and criminality also exists. Research estimates vary, largely because of varying definitions of literacy, but Haigler, et. al (1994) notes that of adult offenders, roughly 35% fall into level 1 (out of 5) and another 35% fall into level 2. These numbers demonstrate an astounding high rate of low literacy of criminals, showing a clear link between crime and literacy, although different studies have produced some varying results. The Criminal Justice Initiative (1997) finds in its research that the number of functionally illiterate is roughly 40%, but despite the slight controversy Shutay, et. al (2010) note that “what is known is that educational attainment and literacy of inmates tends to be lower than that of the population at large.” This conclusion is what shows the correlation between illiteracy and crime so strongly, that criminals have a significantly lower average literacy than the normal population. Like the correlation identified in youth, all professionals identify a correlation between adult criminality and literacy. Kidder (1990) even argues, “Illiteracy is perhaps the strongest common denominator among individuals in corrections.” While this correlation is disturbing, the true problem lies in the recidivism some argue this illiteracy causes.

Recidivism in the United States is incredibly high. Sources from the Federal Sentencing Reporter (2002) show that within the first three years of release, approximately 67.5% of prisoners were arrested, at least once. While this number references the number of arrests, not the number of offenders that were re-incarcerated, it still represents a disturbing trend of high crime even after a life within correctional facilities. The Criminal Justice Initiative (1997) also notes that the “reported rates of recidivism for adult offenders in the United States are extraordinarily high, ranging from 41% to 60%.” Given this rampant recidivism, professionals have tried to determine if literacy can reduce recidivism through literacy or educational correctional programs.

Before analyzing the effect of literacy on recidivism, it is important to observe that often educational programs within prisons are synonymous with literacy programs, or have a direct

correlation upon literacy. Haigler, et. al (1994) notes this, saying that “educational achievement [in correctional facilities] is highly related to literacy proficiency.” This strong correlation is particularly important because many studies only focus precisely on the effect of educational programs, but their findings still offer merit with this correlation. Once again, the research regarding the impact of literacy on recidivism is easily split between the impact of programs on youth, and its impact on adults.

Professionals agree that the impact of programs on youth are deep and significant and can bring change to a juveniles life that gives them an opportunity outside of a life of crime, which can reduce recidivism. O’Cummings, et al (2010) believe the academic outcomes within incarceration can impact a youth after release and reduce recidivism. Similarly Music (2011) notes that “decreasing illiteracy rates among juvenile delinquents is the key to reducing recidivism rates in the United States.” While the professionals agree on the impact, the immediate concern then becomes the time and money it takes. Music (2011) notes however that juveniles may be taught to read at an age appropriate reading level in just 30 to 50 hours, using certain programs. Thus, while this concern with time and money is valid, juveniles may be taught literacy in a relatively small amount of time, with proper instruction.

Just as professionals found literacy programs impactful to youth, they also concur that they are impactful for older generations. Measurements vary, but all research points to a reduction in recidivism. Music (2011) found that inmates only have a 16% chance of returning to prison if they are given literacy help, but inmates with no such help have a 70% chance. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (1994) asserts different rates, claiming 36% recidivism for those receiving educational help, and 44 percent recidivism for others. The Bureau also notes however that the more programs an offender completed in a month, the less likely their recidivism. The Alabama State Board of Education (Criminal Justice Initiative, 1997) when evaluating this program wrote that “correctional education appears to be the number one factor in reducing recidivism rates nationwide.” With most professionals claiming these programs so clearly reduce recidivism, it is important to look the few arguments against the programs.

While the majority of professionals advocate for literacy programs, a handful instead argue that such programs are ineffective.

Allen (2006) in *An Economic Analysis of Prison Education Programs and Recidivism* for Emory University presents perhaps the strongest arguments against such programs effectiveness. He notes that some variables such as risk-aversion which may predispose a prisoner to take a course may also predispose them to not recidivate. Allen attempted to remove biases and testing errors he noted in data collection, and found that “after performing these regressions, we find no evidence that educational or vocational programs significantly reduce recidivism.” So while most evidence points to decreased recidivism with such programs, Allen finds flaws in the research methods, and instead argues these studies do not show any decrease in recidivism.

Allen (2006) also explores economic theory, or the theory that criminals only commit crime because of the costs and benefits in their situation. He argues that even if recidivism does decrease, literacy programs cause a lower cost of crime, encouraging others to commit crime. He claims that “such courses may reduce inmates’ incentives to recidivate by expanding their legitimate employment options, thereby increasing the opportunity cost of crime.” If the world did strictly model economic theory, what Allen is saying would hold much larger significance, but regardless, what he is saying does offer some merit. When crime is treated with education, crime can become a means to free education, which can make crime more appealing. Further exploring economic theory, Allen argues that “if inmates enjoy educational programs ... each unit of time spent in prison will have less of a deterrent effect on crime. Since the cost of crime will be lower, recidivism should theoretically increase.” While to a degree this argument makes sense, others argue that education is inherently different. Other professionals argue that education provides an enabling experience allowing someone to not pursue a life of crime because of an innate desire to be a functioning member of society.

If such programs actually do not impact recidivism, it becomes necessary to consider what policy changes this would require. Allen (2006) concludes that “neither educational programs nor vocational programs produce a statistically significant reduction in recidivism ... completing a course actually makes an inmate more likely to return to crime.” These findings directly contradict many others findings, but are important to consider. Allen concludes by

suggesting how his findings impact policymakers. “If policymakers’ ultimate goal is to reduce crime, the lack of a statistically significant relationship between prison courses and recidivism show that supporting educational and vocational programs is inefficient. Resources would be more wisely transferred to reducing crime in other fashions.” While this policy shift flows naturally from Allen’s research, it also disagrees with most other professional research.

With the benefit in correctional literacy training recognized by most professionals, it becomes important to evaluate the barriers to implementing such programs. Some research shows that institutional staff are excited and willing to implement such programs, but other researchers found that staff were a large barrier to implementation and seemed to fight such programs. Apart from mere attitude, it also becomes important to recognize financially how feasible these programs are, or if their funding would provide too great a barrier.

Perhaps the most important barrier to examine is the view of correctional staff in implementing literacy programs. Vacca (2004) draws attention to the importance of prison administrators, expressing that “program success or failure is hampered, however, by the values and attitudes of those in the authority position.” In looking at these attitudes, The Criminal Justice Initiative (1997) noted that “the vast majority of corrections officials believe that educational programs not only benefit inmates, but also the facility’s administration ... Indeed, 93% of prison wardens ... strongly supported educational and vocational programming in adult correctional facilities.” This quote shows strong support from wardens for implementation of such programs, but it is important to note this study dates in 1993. Drakeford (2002) in the *Journal of Correctional Education* offered a contrasting opinion stating that, “Some youth correctional officers in key positions believed reading literacy programs interfered with daily operations. Protests were raised over the timing of the sessions ... One major challenge faced by implementers of the study is changing youth correctional officers attitudes towards reading instruction. This will require a shift in institutional culture.” This opinion is more recent, and presents that at least in juvenile systems, many officers resist the training so important to decreasing recidivism. Drakeford (2002) presents the question that must be answered in dealing with this problem,

namely “What are the incentives for correctional administrators to encourage incarcerated youth to improve academically?” The answer to that question is not clear yet, but certainly must be kept in the forefront of the minds of those seeking to implement educational programs in correctional facilities.

While considering barriers to implementation, it also becomes important to evaluate the economical feasibility of implementing these programs. Drakeford (2002) looks at this in the *Journal of Correctional Education* (2002) explaining that “the expense of providing higher education to inmates is minimal when considering the impact upon rates of recidivism and the future savings of preventing re-arrest and re-imprisonment.” He writes perhaps most importantly, that “of all crime prevention methods, education is the most cost effective.” This statement is quite significant, and counters what Allen had advised to policymakers, because if education is truly the most cost effective means to decrease recidivism, policymakers would want to implement it on a far more widespread basis. Drakeford (2002) also argues that educated inmates immediately have realized benefits as they become working members of society, taxpayers, contribute to the economy, and no longer tax the criminal justice system, or cause harm to victims. Overall, professionals agree that while there is a cost associated with these programs, it is the most cost effective way to reduce recidivism and pays back to society upon inmate’s release.

Across the board, professionals agree that there is a clear link between literacy and criminality. Most professionals and studies exploring this topic have found that literacy educational programs significantly reduce recidivism and enable the offender to more easily become a contributing member to their community upon release. Some argue against the programs on philosophical arguments, but the practicality of these arguments seems to fade away. These programs are cost effective in reducing recidivism, and practical to implement. While the current norm for emerging inmates is low literacy and high rates of recidivism, most research seems to suggest literacy programs could decrease this recidivism helping inmates, taxpayers, the economy, overcrowded prisons, and the society in general.

References

Allen, R. (2006). *An Economic Analysis of Prison Education Programs and Recidivism*. Emory University, Department of Economics

This paper provides a thoroughly different view than the majority opinion regarding literacy programs and recidivism. Looking from a number of different perspectives, it argues that literacy programs actually do not decrease recidivism, and may even increase it. This piece proves to be an immense resource while trying to evaluate both sides of the argument, and not just one side.

Anderson, D. A. (1999). The aggregate burden of crime. *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 42(2), 611-642.

This journal article helps evaluate the total financial burden of crime on the United States economy. This helps bring a significant reason for considering the recidivism that is so high within the criminal justice system, because of the excessively large burden crime plays, which is caused so highly by recidivism.

Blumberg, D., & Griffen, D. (2013). Family Connections: The Importance of Prison Reading Programs for Incarcerated Parents and Their Children. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 52, 254-269.

This paper provides a thoroughly discussed breakdown of a family literacy program that allows offenders to read to their children. It argues that these programs provide incentive for good behavior, as well as reducing recidivism and helping with reintegration. The programs also can drastically help motivate offenders' children to chase literacy, and this helps lower the chance that they also will be an offender in the future. The program presented provides a method the researchers feel provides more quality time for offenders with their children. This piece helps in a unique way by bringing a wide breadth of

programs discussed, and the benefits of such programs.

Criminal Justice Initiative. (1997). *Education as crime prevention: Providing education to prisoners*. The Center on Crime, Communities and Culture.

This article provides an excellent analysis of education in relation to prisoners, and their literacy. It helps explore how both youth and adults demonstrate links between illiteracy and criminality, giving a good portion of statistics, and solid analysis.

Drakeford, W. (2002). The Impact of an Intensive Program to Increase the Literacy Skills of Youth Confined to Juvenile Corrections. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 53(4), 139-144.

This research presents a large number of statistics pointing to illiteracy of incarcerated populations. Based off a similar study in Michigan at a county jail, Drakeford investigates a juvenile detention center in Maryland to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, particularly with youth. This piece also helps look at the importance of attitude and its affect in correctional literacy education. This research looks closely not only at the benefits of these programs, but also at the barriers to implementing these educational programs. Most uniquely, this piece brings an extremely strong opinion for supporting correctional literacy programs, along with large amounts of empirical data to support its claims.

Gannon, M., & Lapham, M. (2010, December). Computer-Assisted Literacy Education Serves as Intervention for Incarcerated Women. *Corrections Today*, 50-53.

This article looks at literacy as the first step to obtaining further education for offenders, not just as something to decrease recidivism. It points to many offenders having a disbelief that they are smart enough to read, but argues

when they overcome this barrier they often feel more equipped to overcome other educational barriers. The article points to the success of mentors as well as the use of computers to aid the literacy learning of offenders, as computers allow offenders to feel less threatened by the instruction. The article ultimately provides a strong argument that literacy programs for offenders take large strides towards rehabilitation by helping offenders with the tools they need to further advance themselves outside of the correctional facility.

Gardner, S. (2015, March). Reading Families. *Corrections Today*, 38-42.

This article tries arguing for parental involvement programs within literacy. It looks particularly at program in Baltimore, and it's successes. It tries showing such literacy programs help calm the offenders and bring out a more caring side within them, allowing them to be loving parents. It argues that the program is stress reliving for children, and builds positive role models for the children. Mostly, the article focuses on the implementation of the program, so similar ideas may be used in setting up literacy programs elsewhere.

Haigler, K. O., Harlow, C., O'Connor, P., & Campbell, A. (1994). Literacy behind prison walls. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES-1994-102.

This book provides an immense and thorough background of information and good framework for looking at the state of illiteracy in relation to prisoners. It provides a large number of helpful statistics of varying literacy levels of prisoners using different scales of measurement, and helps demonstrate the clear link between educational programs, and the inmates literacy levels.

Harer, M. D. (1994). *Recidivism among federal prison releasees in 1987: A preliminary report*. Federal Bureau of Prisons. Office

of Research and Evaluation.

This report from the Federal Bureau of Prisons help provide official information about recidivism within the federal prison system. Unfortunately this data is from 1987, but the statistics and data is still helpful in analyzing the grave significance of recidivism within the United States.

Kidder, R. (1990). Should schools pay the price of prison. *Christian Science Monitor*, 82(102), 13.

This article provides a Christian viewpoint regarding education within prisons, arguing strongly that there is a clear link between illiteracy and crime, perhaps being the strongest link between individuals in corrections.

Music, E. (2011). Teaching Literacy in Order to Turn the Page on Recidivism. *Journal of Law & Education*, 41(4), 723-730.

This research provides an excellent big picture view of literacy's effect on recidivism. It doesn't focus on a particular study done, but rather more holistically how literacy effects correctional offenders thereby effecting recidivism. This research looks most at youth, claiming that illiterate youth that initially are incarcerated are often the repeat offenders. The study emphasizes the importance of a juvenile's education continuing after they leave the correctional facility. The study also shows, that while literary training may be intense, it takes relatively little time to begin reading at an appropriate level. The research shows the additional benefits of correctional literacy programs, including lowering costs for taxpayers and building safer communities. Lastly, the piece asks for support from communities, recognizing it is crucial to the building and maintenance of these programs.

Langan, P. A., & Levin, D. J. (2002). Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994. *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, 15(1), 58-65.

This scholarly article provides analysis and statistics from data in 1994 of prisoners and their recidivism to the federal justice system. Unfortunately, this data is from 1994, but the authors recognize this and still draw good analysis and information from the data. It is important to note however, that the recidivism within this article is only federal, but does not account for state or local recidivism.

O’Cummings, M., Bardack, S., & Gonsoulin, S. (2010). *Issue Brief: The importance of literacy for youth involved in the juvenile justice system*. Washington, DC: The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk (NETAC).

This brief issue helps give insightful analysis and statistics about youth in the criminal justice system, and the importance of literacy education for them. The brief insightfully argues that literacy education of juvenile offenders can help set them apart from the start to not reoffend or be drawn to crime in the future.

Shutay, J., Ph.D., Plebanksi, D., Ph.D., & McCafferty, M. (2010). Inmate Literacy Assessment Study at the Lake County Indiana Jail. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 61(2), 99-113.

This study looks at a particular jail and seeks to measure its literacy, and contains other useful information about literacy related to incarceration. It argues that the results of literacy education are not quite as clear as many may argue, but have yet to be truly determined. It seeks to show that a lack of quality education, particularly in literacy, may be a contributing factor to a person’s criminality.

Vacca, J. (2004). Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(4), 297-305.

This research shows that literacy programs not only help with recidivism, but also with managing levels of

violence within the prison, leading to a better prison not only for inmates, but staff also. The research pulls from a variety of different locations within the U.S. claiming large drops in recidivism with educational programs in prisons. The research also looks at the two largest barriers to such educational programs. The research tries showing that educational programs, particularly literary, help offenders learn how to appropriately express their emotion, and deal with their problems.