

Using Recidivism Rate as the Sole Indicator of Prison-Based Rehabilitation Program Usefulness: Lessons for 21st Century Corrections Policy

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Abstract

Offender rehabilitation is one of the goals of the correctional system and a very controversial one that continues to divide policy makers, correctional practitioners, scholars and the general public. And since prison-based education especially at the postsecondary level is a very significant offender rehabilitative program, it is made the focus of this analysis. Offender recidivism rate is often used as the sole indicator of prison-based education program usefulness while ignoring other important considerations. This analysis, therefore, argues that in addition to offender recidivism rate, adequate attention should be given to other important considerations like academic, employment signaling, institutional function, and social values of prison-based education programs in any determination of the usefulness of the programs. This paradigm shift from the conventional way the subject is often examined previously, is scholarly significant, in that, it provides broader and deeper insights and lessons that may be too important and too costly to ignore in 21st century corrections policy and administration.

Keywords: Offender Rehabilitation; Reintegration; Recidivism Rate; Prison-Based Education Program

Introduction

Several scholars hold the view that a degree of inmate rehabilitation and reintegration can be achieved through prison-based education program, that is, that inmates' exposure to such education program is a contributing cause of lowered recidivism and a productive citizenship.

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These perspectives can be sociological, biological, psychological, and economic deterministic in nature (Williams and McShane, 2014, Pararozzi and Guy, 2014; Lilly et al, 2010; Ward and Maruna, 2007). However, the perspectives collectively can be referred to as idealistic/optimistic rehabilitation perspectives. Idealistic and/or optimistic rehabilitation perspectives include but are not limited to moral-development perspective, social-psychological development perspective, and opportunity perspective (Ubah and Robinson, 2003).

Central to these idealistic/optimistic perspectives, as articulated by penologists, criminologists, sociologists, educators, and public figures, is an assumption that correctional education programs can enhance the successful reintegration of some individual inmates from the society of captives into the general society (e.g., Hipp et al., 2010; Bui and Morash, 2010; Bushway and Apel, 2012; Wang et al., 2010; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Cullen, 2007; Travis, 2009; Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Steven and Ward, 1997; Sykes, 1958). In other words, these perspectives can be referred to collectively, as "perspectives of individual change" (Ubah and Robinson, 2003). Perspectives of individual change focus directly on the individual offender as the point of analysis and only indirectly on the larger society. For a detail accounting of the foundations of rehabilitation theories see, for example (Ward and Maruna, 2007).

Nonetheless, the question, then, is what is it about a prison-based education program that reduces offender recidivism – is it its building of moral character, self-esteem, and concept of the self? Is it its provision of a new perspective on life, with attendant reorientation of action; its function as a coping mechanism; the know-how it provides; new interests; its function as a credential in the labor market? The theoretical approaches and empirical evidence that address some of these questions have been discussed by (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Lalessa, 2012; Hipp et al, 2010; Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Ward and Maruna, 2007), among others.

Unfortunately, most studies of correctional education have focused on the debate over whether prison-based education programs work or does not work as determined only by a recidivism rate (e.g., Anderson, 1981; Cullen et al, 2011; Jenkins et al, 1995; Lattimore et al, 2010; Petersilia, 2004; Porporino and Robinson, 1992; Martinson, 1974), while, to a great degree, they have ignored the need to account for other important considerations.

This analysis, therefore, argues that in addition to offender recidivism rate, adequate attention should be given to other important considerations like academic, employment signaling, institutional function and social values of prison-based education programs in any determination of the usefulness of the programs.

This paradigm shift from the way the usefulness of prison-based education programs is mostly determined previously is scholarly significant, in that, among other things, it would enable us to have broader and deeper insights and understanding of the academic debate over prison-based education programs and offender recidivism. It would provide broader and deeper insights and lessons that may be too important and too costly to ignore in 21st century corrections policy and administration. It would help policy makers to have a broader and deeper understanding of the interacting processes at work as they make critical decisions about whether the programs should continue to exist, and if so, how they should be structured, administered and funded. It would help send signals to employers as they make employment decisions on whether to hire an ex-offender or not. And it would shed deeper and broader insights on some of the social issues concerning prison-based education programs and offender recidivism rates. The following are brief discussion of these important considerations value of the subject.

Considerations of Prison-Based Education Programs Usefulness

Recidivism Rate Considerations Value

Offender recidivism rate is the dominant measure of rehabilitative correctional programs success or failure (e.g., Crow and Smykla, 2014; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Ogloff and Davis, 2004; Ubah, 2001; Martinson, 1974). As a result, any assessment of the usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programs must account for its recidivism rate. But the question remains, such as, what is it about recidivism rate considerations value of prison-based education programs?

To that end, it is important to understand that assessment of the usefulness of prison-based education program on recidivism rates among parolees whom it serves is imperative for effective correctional planning and programming (Petersilia, 2004; Robinson, 1990; Mandel, 1963). For instance, Mandel (1963:2) states that:

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 insightful suggestions, Robinson (1990) articulates what I think encompasses a great deal of the potential policy implications of recidivism rate considerations value of studies of prison-based education programs. He stresses that studies on offender recidivism rates will aid policy makers and correctional administrators in making critical decisions about whether rehabilitative programs should exist and if so how they should be structured, administered and funded; 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. Studies 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.

After all is said and done, it is important to note that any assessment of the usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programs as measured by offender recidivism rates should also account its other important considerations like academic, employment signaling, institutional function and social considerations value of the programs. The questions, then, are: What is it about academic consideration value of prison-based education programs? What is it about employment signaling consideration value of prison-based education programs? What is it about institutional function consideration value of prison-based education programs? What is it about social consideration value of prison-based education programs? And what are the lessons learned from the examination of the values of these considerations, and the importance of such lessons, for 21st century corrections policy and administration? The following are attempts to address the questions.

Academic Considerations Value

Debate over prison-based education continues to divide scholars. Some argue that, to a considerable extent, such education accomplishes its purpose, namely, significant rate of recidivism reduction (e.g., Anderson, 1981; Jenkins et al, 1995;

Porporino and Robinson, 1992; Schumacker et al, 1990), whereas others think that it does not work (e.g., Martinson, 1974; Sullivan, 1990; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Central to the debate are two contradictory perspectives on prison education: (a) an idealistic/optimistic view stressing its promise and value and (b) a pessimistic reaction to its perceived ineffectiveness (Ubah and Robinson, 2003). This author has rigorously and critically examined the usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programs from the perspective of its other important considerations beyond merely its significant rate of recidivism reduction measure.

The literature on whether prison-based education works or does not work as measured by significant recidivism rate reduction is not conclusive. Recent studies tend to show more success than earlier ones (e.g., Kurlychek et al, 2012; Grella and Rodriguez, 2011; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Tony and Farrington, 2006; Petersilia, 2004; Ogloff and Davis, 2004; Wade and de Jong, 2000). But it is not clear and sometimes very difficult to establish the interacting factors at work that may have influenced these results. However, a scrutiny of statistical association of empirical aspects of literature on prison-based education and offender recidivism, has strongly suggested the conclusion that it is a spurious relationship (Ubah and Robinson, 2003). A relationship between two variables is said to be spurious when both variables are dependent on a third variable (McKean and Byers, 2000).

The questions, then, are: (A) Should the conclusions, as they are represented in the literature of criminology, criminal justice and public policy end the debate over prison education and offender recidivism; 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 (Travis, 2009). 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 usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programming, it is important that future studies utilize multiple criteria in assessing the usefulness or lack of it of the programs (Anderson, 1981; Petersilia, 2004). This paradigm shift would enable us to have a broader and in-depth insight and understanding of the usefulness or lack of it of the programs.

As a result, this paper calls on future studies on the subject to utilize multiple criteria in any determination of the usefulness or lack of it of the programs and not just with recidivism rate measurement only.

Employment Signaling Considerations Value

Another important idea that perhaps should be considered in the discussion of the usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programs especially at the college level beyond their effects on offender recidivism rate reduction is the employment signaling considerations value of the programs. Perhaps this idea can be captured under the framework of opportunity perspective of prison-based post-secondary education programs (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Edwards, 2014; Palmer, 2012). Opportunity perspective suggests that most crimes, especially crimes on the street--which are usually carried out by poor, undereducated, and disenfranchised members of a society--can be explained by a lack of viable, legitimate means to the attainment of economic opportunities (i.e., external conditions) (e.g., Bui and Morash, 2010; Herrschaft et al., 2009; Hipp et al., 2010; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Clear, 2007). This notion originated with Merton's (1938) strain theory. The strain theory suggests that deprivation, either absolute or relative, heightens feelings of anger, frustration, and confusion which tend to result in crime (Agnew, 2001; Bernard, 1990).

Opportunity perspective, therefore, suggests that acquiring college-education credentials in prison will provide inmates with legitimate human capital (resources that influence future activities in people, such as marketable legitimate skills, trades, network relationships) that can give desistance green signals to potential employers and can open up better job opportunities and legitimate and strong social network relationships, which, in turn, can build social bonds that protect against criminal behavior (e.g., Bushway and Apel, 2012; Hershberger, 1987; Hipp et al., 2010; Hirschi, 1969; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006).

It has been well documented that going to college enables one to obtain credentials for the labor market that could open up considerable opportunities and social network relationships for social mobility (Bui and Morash, 2010; Wang et al., 2010; Ellis and Lane, 1963). Thus, "the higher the attainment of education, the greater one's earning power and the greater the possibility of improving one's station in life" (Johnson, 1964:610).

On the basis of this well-established finding, opportunity perspective suggests that inmates' completion of participation in a college-level, prison-based education program is a likely desistance signal and evidence of pro-social and being engaged in the process of upward mobility which in turn provide inmates with some necessary legitimate human and social capital resources (e.g., skills, knowledge, and network relationships) that can help some of them to "going straight" and abandon criminal behavior when released into the larger society (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Kurlychek et al, 2012; Latessa, 2012; Bui and Morash, 2010; Hipp et al, 2010; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006).

Thus, Hershberger (1987) notes that education in prison, is a vital link, a bridge for inmates who are moving from incarceration to the real world. With their newfound academic or vocational achievements, inmates have the rudiments of new job skills that they can polish with further education or on-the-job training. With their success in an academic or vocational classroom, they develop social skills that are necessary for the workplace. Like education in the larger society, this idea of education in prison has some currency in the public arena; thus, former President Clinton states, "Education is the fault line, the great Continental Divide between those who will prosper and those who will not in the new economy" (Nicholas, 1996:14).

Hershberger (1987) also states that inmates' educational successes in prison seem to have a generalizing effect because they tend to prepare ex-offenders to further their education outside of prison. This means that educational successes in prison can serve as "catalysts" or "hooks" that compel ex-offenders to find the motivation to go on in their educational experience outside of prison, and they may be able to improve their chances of staying out of prison after completing some courses. Perhaps, this assumption by Hershberger is greatly shared more so by no other group than the "Convict Criminology" movement of the American Society of Criminology.

The above assumptions of employment signaling considerations value of prison-based education programs which were greatly captured by opportunity perspective are in line with a major feature of the Good Live Model (GLM) of offender rehabilitation (Ward and Maruna, 2007) especially in the way the model analyzes the notion of criminogenic needs in terms of internal and external conditions. Thus, Ward and Maruna (2007:160) put it nicely:

In order to achieve primary goods effectively in particular circumstances, it is necessary to meet two sets of conditions. First, individuals require the capabilities or skills required to perform good-directed actions and, by doing so, engage in the valued activity or else reach it via a series of secondary steps. Second, in order to meet human needs it is necessary to have access to relevant opportunities, and to be supported – or, at the very least, not thwarted – by others in the process. Deficits in either of these two sets of factors would therefore make it unlikely that a person would be able to achieve what he or her set out to. He or she would be unable to have his or her needs met and therefore to secure the relevant primary goods. Criminogenic needs constitute the relevant deficits in the internal and external conditions.

There is a point in Ward and Maruna's assertion and that has to do with the importance of employment signaling considerations value of prison-based post-secondary education programs beyond their actual effects on offender recidivism rate considerations value.

Social Considerations Value

Central to the social considerations value of post-secondary correctional education on prison-based education programs are (a) the social importance of prison-based college education programs, beyond their effects 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 rate (e.g., Yates, 2012; Palmer, 2012; Tewksbury et al, 2000; Warner, 1999). However, as this paper argues, education in prison is nonetheless valuable for a number of other reasons than their effects on offender recidivism (e.g., Schriro, 2012; Johnson, 2002; Petersilia, 2000; Hobler, 1999). To begin with, the value attached to education in the larger 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. They are probably 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 (e.g., Schriro, 2012; Sweetland, 1996). This notion perhaps was well stressed powerfully in Lejins' (1971:26) work, in which he asserts that:

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 social considerations value of education in prison in particular and the wider society in general 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 (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Piquero, 2012; Visher et al, 2011; Lattimore et al, 2010; Travis, 2009; Petersilia, 2003). For example, Petersilia (2003:2) epitomizes this "iron law of imprisonment" (Travis, 2009) by asserting 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 needs of parolees appear more serious; and the corrections system retains few rehabilitation programs.

Nonetheless, most research literature on the subject has suggested no simple connection between attainment of correctional education program while incarcerated and successful reintegration into the larger community. However, it is the view of this author that the determination of the value of prison-based education programs is not and cannot be satisfactorily captured by one measure of their usefulness or lack of it. Thus, the standard of recidivism rate reduction alone is shortsighted because for one thing it ignores other important considerations that would facilitate broader and deeper insights on the subject.

Also, the standard of recidivism rate reduction only is one of the major factors that heighten the controversial debate of whether correctional education programs in our penal systems should continue to exist and funded or not (e.g., Cullen et al, 2011; Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Martinson, 1974).

Another important social considerations value of prison education program is that studies on the subject enable us to understand and appreciate how the developments or changes in the larger society (e.g., the elimination of prison-based education Pell Grants by Congress) affected prison-based college education programs and offender recidivism (Ubah, 2001). This understanding is important for sociology, criminology and public policy alike because all the technocratic language notwithstanding, it clearly shows how the life permitted to those inhabiting what Goffman (1961) describes as "total institutions" reflects the shifting values of society-at-large (Delisi and Conis, 2013; Clear et al, 2013; Ubah and Robinson, 2003; Farrington, 1992).

Thus, in his analysis, Goffman (1961:xiii) 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." 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, prisons can better be described as "organizations in action" (Ubah, 2014). Organizations in action are organizations that are in dynamic relationships with their environmental conditions and processes such as the political, legislative, judicial, economic, technological and social milieu (e.g., Ubah, 2014; Bushway and Apel, 2012; Farrington, 1992; Zucker, 1987; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976). As the loss of Pell Grants for prison-based college education programming has shown, for instance, various external environmental forces and pressures can have profound negative effects on the internal social systems of a prison.

Institutional Function Considerations Value

Furthermore in our efforts toward understanding better some of the usefulness of prison-based education programs beyond their effects on offender recidivism is the institutional function considerations value of the programs. Thus, it has been documented that education programs in prison serve some important institutional functions such as job creation, control mechanism, and operational maintenance (e.g., Johnson, 2002; Taylor and Tewksbury, 2002; Colvin, 1992; McKelvey, 1977).

The job creation value of education programs in prison serves an important institutional need in the sense that the programs provide jobs for some educators who may be employed to teach inmates in various academic and vocational fields.

Perhaps more importantly, the programs may serve as control mechanism and operational maintenance. This is so because the programs may serve as incentives which prison authorities can use to control inmates toward becoming more conforming to the rules and regulations of the penitentiary. For instance, access control to participation in educational programs as well as continuing participation in the programs provide prison authorities with a form of positive sanctions which is crucial for maintaining order in prisons (Clear et al, 2013; Colvin, 1992).

In addition, they may also 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 (e.g., Delisi and Conis, 2013; Clear et al, 2013; Johnson, 2002; Mckelvey, 1977). Thus, prison-based education programs may likely inhibit some crime and disorder in prison as well as offer a viable legitimate 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 which in turn, could enable some of them to "go straight" by becoming productive citizens when released from the society of captives into the larger society (Latessa, 2012; Maruna, 2012; Sykes, 1958).

On the basis of the above points, 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 both within and outside the wall as well as other important functions than their effects on offender recidivism rate. As noted above, the investment is a form of control mechanism, in that, without educational programs in prison to occupy inmates' time, alleviate the degree of prisonization and degradation ceremonies they go through (Clemmer, 1958; Garfinkel, 1956), and reinforce their motivation and hope to go straight while at the same time controlling them in systematically ways, inmates are left to use their resources and imagination in non-productive or counter-productive ways (Delisi and Conis, 2013; Taylor and Tewksbury, 2002).

Lessons for 21st Century Corrections Policy and Administration

Several important lessons can be gleaned from this critical analysis. The first lesson that can be learned from the analysis is that there are other important considerations of the usefulness or lack of it of prison-based education programs beyond their intended effects on offender recidivism rate reduction. This lesson is very important particularly because it is the thrust of this analysis that prison-based education programs especially at the postsecondary level were not only meant to provide inmates with skills or credentials for recidivism rate reduction as they attempt to make transition into the larger society, but also have other important values such as academic, employment signaling, institutional function and social considerations (Clear 2011; Maruna, 2012; Ubah, 2014).

That being the case, one of the challenges facing policy makers, correctional practitioners, scholars, and the general public as regard to prison-based education programming is for all to be insightful enough about the other usefulness of prison-based education programs beyond their effects on offender recidivism rate. Recognizing and understanding the values of the other considerations of the programs beyond their effects on offender recidivism rate could greatly aid stakeholders as they make critical and important decisions about whether they programs should continue to exist, and if so, how they should be structured and funded.

The second lesson that can be learned from this analysis, is that, it is important to recognize and understand that instead of the wasteful and pointless ways most prisoners do their time, we should instead encourage them to do their time constructively and maturely--by getting them to begin to better "think about stopping at red lights" as well as "learning their lessons" (Piquero, 2012; Johnson, 2002). Perhaps one of the important ways that could be accomplished is through a well-designed and funded postsecondary correctional education strategy that aimed at mediating against offender's moral deficiency and skills. Such intervention program could potentially enable some offenders to become more morally engaged in their everyday social actions and interactions. Such programs, may also have the capacity to spur offenders to develop a belief in the law, obey the law, and thus become a productive member of society much more than before (Piquero, 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Jablecki, 2000).

As a number of research suggest, inmates can learn their lessons constructively and maturely through prison-based education programs partially designed within the framework of the principles of "restorative justice" (e.g., Delisi and Conis, 2013; Sullivan and Tift, 2005; Braithwaite and Strang, 2001; Halstead, 1999). For instance, 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 ..."

Perhaps like the approach of this analysis, the principles of restorative justice go beyond the status quo upon which most of our criminal justice system programs are currently based, to an idea and philosophy that would help us in the attempts toward addressing the problems of crime and penal systems for the betterment of the victims, offenders, and the general public (Braithwaite and Strang, 2001). This philosophy is based on the premise of showing inmates how they are responsible for the consequences of their choices.

Unfortunately, most of the studies on the subject were mainly concerned with the debate over whether prison-based education program works or does not work as measured by offender recidivism rate, while to a great degree, they ignored the need to give adequate attention to its academic, employment signaling, institutional function and social considerations value of the programs.

In this analysis, however, the author has made serious efforts to make explicit and compelling case for the other important considerations of prison-based education programs other than recidivism rate, and in the process has gleaned some lessons as well as recognize some of the importance of such lessons for corrections policy and administration. In the final analysis, it must be reemphasized that the usefulness of correctional education programs cannot be satisfactorily captured by using offender recidivism rate as the only measure. Multiple criteria other than only recidivism rate are imperative and highly desirable steps in 21st century corrections policy and administration.

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