

Recidivism Rates of Women Offenders and Participation of Education Programs in Prisons

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Introduction:

What actually is recidivism? Recidivism is defined differently in many states and has several other definitions that it has been given. To some recidivism is defined as a re-arrest, to others as re-conviction, and sometimes even as re-incarceration.

““Recidivism” and “failure” are not always synonymous when talking about offenders programs. Recidivism, as defined by Webster’s Dictionary is “a tendency to slip back into a previous criminal pattern.” “Failure,” on the other hand, is a broad term that often encompasses both relapse into criminal behavior and the exhibition of non-criminal behavior that is unacceptable in correctional programs.” (Beck, 2001, p.1)

For the purposes of this study, the definition of recidivism will be based on whether offenders are convicted of a future crime.

The time frame of recidivism is another area that doesn’t just have a black and white answer. “The time frame for counting recidivism in various state prison systems extends from one to 22 years after release from prison” (Beck, 2001, p.1). Using a longitudinal study over ten years will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of the educational programs on the short term and the long term recidivism rates. The longer study will in turn show the true effects of the educational programs and its ability to keep offenders from returning to prison. The educational programs will consist of: GED programs, college level courses, parenting courses, life skills courses and vocational training.

Recidivism is a major a concern and problem that plagues the United States. Reducing recidivism rates is a very important issue and the focus here is on the

recidivism rates of women and their participation in prison education programs. This is an area worth investigating because if the recidivism rates of women participating in educational programs is substantially reduced then the money that is saved by the reduction of recidivism rates because of the lower crimes rates and can go to further funding more programs in prisons. If research shows that educational programs effectively reduce recidivism rates in women offenders and that they have helped to lower crimes rates then that would decrease the spending of the taxpayers' money on the cost of women offenders' recidivating. If more money was put towards funding and establishing educational programs it would outweigh what it costs to re-incarcerate the women that keep re-offending. The more research that is done and the more that this area can be explored, the better the results on the effectiveness of educational programs in prisons can be seen. This research will seek to answer the question, is recidivism in women offenders influenced by their participation in prison educational programs versus women prisoners who do not participate in prison education programs.

Hypothesis:

Women offenders who are in prison that offer educational programs and participate in them will have lower recidivism rates than women offenders who are in prison that offer educational programs but do not participate in them.

Literature Review:

A number of studies have show that educational programs in prisons are effective for reducing recidivism in women offenders. The Three State Recidivism Study, (Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 1997) conducted in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio involved approximately 3,600 men and women inmates that had been released from prison at least

three years. The study looked at the effect that participation in educational programs had on recidivism rates. The study showed that male and female offenders who participated in educational programs while imprisoned reduced re-incarceration by 29 percent.

“Translated into savings, every dollar spent on education returns more than two dollars to the citizens in reduced prison costs” (Steurer et al., 1997). This study did show that educational programs did seem to effectively reduce recidivism rates but a limitation was that the study wasn’t just done specifically on women.

In 2007, Gonzalez, Romero and Cerbana published the results of a study that was done specifically on mothers that had been incarcerated. The study was called “Parent Education Program for Incarcerated Mothers in Colorado” (2007). The researchers also found that there are other benefits when women participate in educational and vocational programs other than reducing recidivism.

“Educational programs in federal institutions have shown great promise. Prison administrators have reported distinctive, positive behavior changes among inmates. Consequently, inmates are posing less threat to prison officers. In addition, it has been observed that disciplinary problems among inmates who take part in educational programs tend to decrease.” (Gonzalez, Romero, & Cerbana, 2007, p. 358)

The researchers found that the recidivism rates of women that participated in vocational programs had a recidivism rate of 8.75 percent. Women who completed their GED and participated in vocational training had a 6.71 percent. Recidivism rate of women inmates who did not participate in either vocational or GED programs had a recidivism rate of 26

percent (Gonzalez et al., 2007). These findings clearly show that educational and vocational programs had a positive impact on recidivism rates of the women inmates.

The Management & Training Corporation (MTC) Institute has also conducted research and explored many of the dimensions of recidivism rates using both men and women participants. Research found in *Programs that Help Inmates Stay Out of Prison* (MTC, 2003) that education does work and seems to be very effective in crime prevention. A limitation of the study was that it was done on both men and women not just specifically on women and the findings weren't reported separately on women and men, but grouped together. One of the conclusions that was reached by the research done by the MTC Institute was that "Investments in prison education and substance abuse treatment can provide a 25-30 percent reduction in recidivism from properly designed and implemented programs" (p.13). Research also showed that for both women and men that:

- 57 percent of non-participants were rearrested versus 48 percent of the participants;
- 35 percent of non-participants were re-convicted versus 27 percent of the participants; and,
- 31 percent of non-participants were re-incarcerated versus 21 percent of the participants (MTC, 2003).

Research in several states has shown that educational and vocational programs do in fact reduce and cut recidivism rates dramatically. Education seems to be a key component and one that works when it comes to the reduction of recidivism in all inmates, not just women. Pete Shuler (2002), surveyed research in Florida, Maryland,

Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. His results indicated that educational programs in prisons have cut recidivism rates dramatically. A study of 3,000 participants in Virginia showed that inmates that participated in educational programs cut recidivism from 49 percent to 20 percent (Shuler, 2002). “At the Central Utah Correctional Facility, education programs cut recidivism by 18 percent. A recent Florida study revealed that on average, recidivism drops 2.9 percent for each year of academic competence, as measured by testing” (Shuler, 2002, p. 1). In Ohio, research indicated that post-secondary education had a positive effect on women even more than on men.

“The state's post-secondary education program impacted women to a greater degree than men. While the overall recidivism rate for women in the study was 30.3 percent, the rate for women who worked toward a degree at the time of their release was only 16.9 percent. The rate for those who earned a college degree was even lower, 8.3 percent.” (Shuler, 2002, p. 1)

Research from the Bureau of Justice indicates that the two most important factors affecting whether an individual will become a criminal in the first place are lack of education and lack of employment opportunities (Shuler, 2002). *Women's Participation in Prison Education: What We Know and What We Don't Know* (Rose, 2004) is an important study because it focuses specifically on women inmates and their participation in educational programs in prisons. Rose reviews studies that were conducted from 1979 thru 1997.

“These two separate trend studies examine the level of women's participation in prison education programs (i.e., basic classes up to the ninth grade, middle school, high school and/or GED programs, and college courses-educational

programming) and, women's participation in vocational programs (i.e., programs dedicated to training participants for a job-vocational programming) during incarceration over two decades (1979 to 1997).” (Rose, 2004, p. 2)

Research done in the 1990s found that most of the women that enter prison are undereducated and 20 percent of those that are incarcerated are illiterate (Rose, 2004). To test the hypothesis of the impact of participation in educational programs on recidivism, the researchers performed Mann-Whitney U tests. Women were put into groups of non-participants, low-level participants, moderate-level participants, and high-level participants. The researchers also explained differences among women based on whether they had participated in an educational and/or vocational program versus their participation in other authorized prison programs. The results of all the tests indicated that participation in educational programs does seem to be linked to reducing recidivism. “Regardless of the nature of the relationship between educational programming and reduced recidivism (whether it is direct or indirect), education is an important element in this mix” (Rose, 2004, p. 10).

Research done by Morash, Bynum, and Koons (1998) titled *Women Offenders: Programming Needs and Promising Approaches*, reviewed 242 innovative psychological, work, parenting, and other innovative programs for women offenders across a number of states. “Jail administrators nominated 49 programs, with substance abuse programs the most numerous followed by education, life skills, mental health, health, and multiple-focus programs” (Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998, p. 7). Of the 242 programs reviewed for women offenders, jail administrators chose 49 of the programs that seemed to work best and meet the needs of women offenders for the offenders to be able to participate in

while in prison. Of the programs reviewed recidivism was only measured for six of them, but the survey indicated a positive step in the right direction of what works in treating women offenders and preventing recidivism (Morash et al., 1998). The results of the survey showed that these kinds of programs (education, life skills, substance abuse, mental health, health, and multiple focus programs), indicated that they were heading in a positive direction when it came to understanding women's needs and what works best when it comes to treating women offenders.

In 2000, Hendricks, Hendrick, and Kaufmann (2000) published *Literacy, Criminal Activity, and Recidivism*, a compilation of several studies on the impact of education recidivism on both men and women offenders. Results from two of the studies were particularly interesting and significant. In one, an 18-month study done by Jenkins, Pendry, and Steurer (1993, as cited in Hendricks, Hendricks, & Kaufmann, 2000) examined the recidivism outcomes for inmates participating in Adult Basic Education, GED, vocational education and post secondary education programs. Results showed that there were no recidivists for post secondary students, and there were reduced recidivism rates for participants that participated in the other programs along with higher wages (Hendricks et al., 2000).

The other study done by Harer (1994, as cited in Hendricks, Hendricks, & Kaufmann, 2000) was a three-year investigation of 1,205 men and women releasees. Results showed a strong positive relationship between education and a reduction in recidivism of both men and women (Hendricks et al., 2000). The more education releasees had, the lower the recidivism rates of the offenders. Offenders that had some high school education had a 54.6 percent recidivism rate, but college graduates, on the

other hand, had a 5.4 percent recidivism rate (Hendricks et al., 2000). “According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, there is an inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education. The more education a prisoner receives, the less likely he/she is to be re-arrested or re-imprisoned” (Hendricks et al., 2000, p. 1).

All of the studies that have been reviewed and reported on here have shown that education does seem to be a major component in reducing recidivism rates of women offenders. Further research should be done to provide more information on what kinds of educational programs and how educational programs can continue to effectively reduce recidivism rates in women offenders. More importantly, further research should be done on what kinds of educational programs and if certain educational programs tailored more specifically towards women offenders reduce recidivism in women. Further research on women offenders and participation in educational programs provided in prison needs to be conducted to see how beneficial they are as correctional policy and whether improvements are necessary to address the specific needs of women.

Methodology:

This study is designed to gather accurate and beneficial research to evaluate how effective educational programs in prisons are when women offenders participate in them versus when they do not and how it affects recidivism rates.

Participants:

The study will consist of approximately 1,500 volunteer women offenders statewide. Using volunteer participants might affect the results because volunteers may be more motivated than non-volunteers and they are aware that they are being studied versus a method of random assignment. However, a problem with random assignment is

including subjects who choose not to respond or participate thereby possibly lowering the number of subjects and limiting the confidence in our analysis.

Five hundred of the participants will consist of women offenders who did not participate in any kind of educational program while in prison (this includes any GED, vocational, or job training programs), five hundred of the participants will be women offenders that have participated in some kind of educational program, but didn't complete it and the other the other five hundred participants will include women offenders that did participate and finished an educational program while in prison. The ages of the participants will range from 18-45.

Collection of Data:

The participants will be studied for ten years after release from prison. An evaluation of each of the offenders will be done bi-annually (every six months) to see if any of the offenders have recidivated, how long after release thereby looking at survival rates, how many times, and what kind of crime. At the end of the study the recidivism rates of the women participants that participated in educational programs and completed them while in prison will be measured and compared to the recidivism rates of the women participants that participated partially in educational programs, but dropped out, and the participants that didn't participate in any kind of educational program while in prison. The data will compare the differences in recidivism as a formation of education, and discuss the results and policy implications.

Expected Findings:

Once this study is performed most likely the findings will indicate that when women offenders participate in educational programs while in prison the recidivism rates

of those participants is lower than the recidivism rates of women that participated in educational programs, but didn't complete them, and is substantially lower than the women participants that didn't participate in any educational programs while in prison. The women participants that did complete part of an educational program will have lower recidivism rates than the women participants that didn't participate in any educational program, but lower than the women participants that finished an educational program while in prison. These findings should also help to know more specifically what kinds of educational programs work best for women offenders and what programs are tailored best for their needs. From the research and the participants studied the educational and vocational programs that the women participated in and which programs the participants completed seemed to have the lowest recidivism rates, should help a lot with where the main focus should be. For instance, it will be very beneficial for deciding what kinds of educational and vocational programs work best and should be funded in prisons for women offenders.

Policy Implications:

Based on evidence from other studies that have already been done on educational programs in prisons and recidivism rates of women, there has been a lot of evidence to support the finding that so far educational programs in prisons are very effective in reducing recidivism rates of women. After this study is performed and more research has been done, the results may show that a need to support educational programs in prisons for women offenders is a good tool towards reducing recidivism rates. More research should be done to see what educational programs seem to work best and have been most effective in reducing recidivism rates. More specifically, which educational programs

(GED programs, college programs, parenting programs, life skills programs, or vocational training programs) seem to reduce recidivism in women offenders the most. More research should also be done on what the needs of women offenders are after they get out of prison and how educational programs in prison can be designed to address some of those needs. Investing in educational programs versus re-incarcerating an offender would save taxpayers a lot of money. “The drop in recidivism in each state clearly indicates that the program returns at least \$2 every \$1 dollar spent in terms of saving in cell space on those who do not return to the system” (Steurer et al., 1997, p. 3).

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