

# Prison education cuts recidivism and improves employment, study finds

August 22 2013

---

Prison inmates who receive general education and vocational training are significantly less likely to return to prison after release and are more likely to find employment than peers who do not receive such opportunities, according to a new RAND Corporation report.

The findings, from the largest-ever meta-analysis of correctional educational studies, suggest that prison [education](#) programs are cost effective, with a \$1 investment in prison education reducing incarceration costs by \$4 to \$5 during the first three years post-release.

"We found strong evidence that correctional education plays a role in reducing [recidivism](#)," said Lois Davis, the project's lead researcher and a senior policy researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "Our findings are clear that providing inmates education programs and vocational training helps keep them from returning to prison and improves their future [job prospects](#)."

Researchers found that inmates who participate in correctional education programs have a 43 percent lower chance of returning to prison than those who do not. The estimate is based on studies that carefully account for [motivation](#) and other differences between correctional education recipients and non-recipients.

Employment after release was 13 percent higher among [prisoners](#) who participated in either academic or vocational education programs than those who did not. Those who participated in vocational training were 28

percent more likely to be employed after release from prison than who did not receive such training.

The findings also suggest that prison education programs are cost effective. The direct costs of providing education are estimated to be from \$1,400 to \$1,744 per inmate, with re-incarceration costs being \$8,700 to \$9,700 less for each inmate who received correctional education as compared to those who did not.

While the results consistently demonstrated the benefits of prison education programs, researchers say there is not yet enough evidence to determine which educational programs performed the best.

"Our findings suggest that we no longer need to debate whether correctional education works," Davis said. "But we do need more research to tease out which parts of these programs work best."

The study, which was supported by the U.S. departments of education and justice, should be of interest to corrections officials and state lawmakers as they cope with operating prisons during difficult budget times.

There long has been debate about the role prison-based education programs can play in preparing inmates to return to society and keeping them from returning to prison. Recidivism remains high nationally, with four in 10 inmates returning to prison within three years of release. While most states offer some type of correctional education, surveys find no more than half receive any instruction.

In general, people in U.S. prisons have less education than the general population. In 2004, 36 percent of individuals in state prisons had less than a high school diploma, compared to 19 percent of the general U.S. population older than 16.

In addition, ex-offenders frequently often lack vocation skills and a steady history of employment. Researchers say the dynamics of prison entry and re-entry to society make it hard for ex-offenders to find work and build an employment history.

RAND researchers conducted a comprehensive review of the scientific literature of research on correctional education and performed a meta-analysis to synthesize the findings from multiple studies about the effectiveness of correctional education programs. A meta-analysis is a comprehensive way of synthesizing findings from multiple studies to develop scientific consensus about the efficacy of a program or an intervention.

The analysis was limited to studies published about education programs in the United States that included an academic or vocational curriculum with a structured instructional component. The analysis focused on recidivism, but also examined whether education improved labor force participation and gains in academic achievement test scores. The study did not access life skills programs.

Programs that offered instruction toward a high school diploma or general education development (GED) certificate were the most common approach. Studies that included adult basic education, high school diploma/GED, postsecondary education and [vocational training](#) all showed reductions in recidivism.

Because of overlaps in curriculum and a lack of detail about the duration of instruction, researchers could not determine what types of programs worked best.

Researchers also examined the relationship between computer-assisted instruction and academic performance, which is important in prisons because the technology allows self-paced learning that can be delivered

at a lower cost than traditional instruction.

The study found some evidence that computer-assisted instruction further improved math and reading achievement among inmates, but the findings were not strong enough to reach a final conclusion.

"As corrections officials struggle to cope during a period of constrained government spending, prison education is an approach that may help save money in even the short term," Davis said.

Provided by RAND Corporation

Citation: Prison education cuts recidivism and improves employment, study finds (2013, August 22) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-08-prison-recidivism-employment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.