Prison education

Increasing offenders' education or skill level to improve their employment prospects on release from prison.

First published
9 May 2016

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost
 Overall reduction, some rises	 Very strong	 Moderate	 Moderate	 Low	

Focus of the intervention

Education and skills training programmes in correctional facilities aim to increase the education or skills levels of participants to improve their employment prospects on release.

Prisoners often have lower educational attainment than the general population and have fewer transferable skills. These are believed to limit their opportunities for employment and therefore increase the risk of reoffending.

Education and skills training may involve basic adult education, vocational training for specific fields of employment, or graduate education programmes.

These can be carried out in a range of correctional facilities, either by employees of the facility or outsourced to private providers.

This narrative is based on one systematic review of 58 studies, all of which were conducted in the USA.

A second systematic review of 33 studies contributes to the mechanism and implementation sections below (study locations unspecified).

The reviews use reoffending as their crime outcome but also measure post-release employment rates.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that educational and skills training programmes in correctional facilities have reduced reoffending, but there is some evidence (from two studies) that they have increased reoffending.

The overall evidence is taken from Review one, which included 58 studies. A meta-analysis of 50 studies found that participation in correctional education programmes is associated with a 13% reduction in the risk of reoffending. This reduction is statistically significant. Programme participants were also statistically more likely to find employment post-release.

A meta-analysis of seven studies of the highest methodological quality found a slightly higher decrease in reoffending than the analysis of 50 studies of all qualities.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The search strategy for the review was well-designed and transparent, with appropriate statistical tests conducted. It took into account any potential publication bias and only compared studies with similar methodologies and outcome measures.

Mechanism – how does it work?

Review one suggested a number of ways in which education and skills training programmes might have an effect on offending.

It noted that low levels of educational attainment or vocational skills impeded the ability of ex-prisoners to find employment once they were released back into the community. Without these skills, ex-prisoners may either find it difficult to gain employment upon release or may be forced to find lower-skilled jobs with lower hourly rates.

In turn, employment is believed to socialise people into a productive role, which may redirect ex-prisoners' energy towards their employment, family and community, and away from offending.

Review one found that, for 18 studies, the employment rates of ex-prisoners who participated in educational and skills programmes were 13% higher than for non-participants (this was statistically significant).

There were also increases in both reading and maths attainment levels for participants, though these were not significant.

When breaking this down by type of programme, those who participated in vocational training had a 28% higher chance of obtaining employment compared to control groups.

For all of the academic programmes combined (basic education, high school and post-secondary education), participants had an 8% higher chance of obtaining employment compared to control groups.

Review two noted that in addition to the presumed benefit of reducing risk of future offending, work and education programmes are believed to reduce problem behaviours within institutions by providing constructive activities and a tool for the reinforcement of positive behaviours.

A number of different theories were discussed, including economic theories of crime, which suggest that offending may be reduced by ensuring ex-prisoners are more employable.

Informal social control theory suggests future reoffending may be reduced since voluntary participation in education and skills programmes may foster good relationships between instructors and inmates. Formal social control theory suggests that social bonds with instructors and employers might increase commitment to conventional aspects of society.

Review two found that primary studies reporting larger effects for employment rates also tended to observe a positive impact on reoffending.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

Review one analysed the different types of education and skills programmes offered within correctional facilities in the USA.

It found statistically significant decreases in reoffending compared to control groups to be associated with provision of adult basic education, high school or general educational diploma, post-secondary education and vocational education.

While the specific content of these education and skills programmes was not described, they had to be taught by an instructor and led to the attainment of a degree, licence or certification.

The review also analysed whether the type of instructional delivery methods of the programme had an effect on reoffending rates.

Whole class instruction, classes taught by a college teacher, classes taught by a correctional employee and programmes with post-release services all saw statistically significant reductions in reoffending compared to no treatment.

Since some programmes used more than one type of programme or delivery method however, it was not possible to compare across treatment types.

Review one suggested that the common thread throughout all of the delivery methods associated with significant decreases in reoffending (mentioned above) was that they connect inmates both directly and indirectly with the outside community.

In addition, programmes with a post-release component provide continuity in support and assist inmates as they continue their education or enter the workforce in the months immediately after release.

Review two conducted an analysis to see whether different programme types had different effects on reoffending.

The findings suggested that post-secondary education had the largest statistically significant effect, with vocational training and general educational diplomas showing more moderate but nevertheless significant effects.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

Review one noted that the better programmes offered a post-release component, providing continuity of support that can assist inmates as they continue in education or enter the workforce.

However, it also noted that the administration and delivery of correctional education differs from state to state. For example, different entities – departments of corrections, education or public safety – may be responsible for administering and financing correctional education programmes for prison systems in their areas.

Some states have their own correctional school district, while others may contract with community colleges to provide general educational diploma preparation, post-secondary education or vocational training programmes.

In addition, privately operated corrections firms also have responsibility for providing correctional education to adult prisoners.

While Review one authors specifically looked for information on programme implementation, they found the primary studies included within the review generally lacked specific information about the dosage of the programme. For example, the duration, the number or grade level of the course, how many hours or days inmates were exposed to formal class instruction and how many hours inmates worked on assignments outside the classroom each day.

Review two noted that programmes with successful outcomes tend to have multiple components, follow-up programming, and focus on skills relevant to the job market.

One barrier to successful outcomes of the programme may be that any effects of these programs on employability may be muted by the difficulties of finding employment with a criminal record.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

While none of the reviews conducted an economic analysis using information synthesised from the primary studies within the reviews, Review one found information from other sources to calculate some of the costs and potential benefits of education and skills training programmes.

The average annual cost of education per inmate was estimated to be $1,400 to $1,744 in 2008. The average annual cost of incarceration was estimated to be $28,323 to $31,286 per inmate. Therefore for 100 inmates, the amount of money saved in costs between the two groups was estimated to be $0.87 million to $0.97 million based on the lower re-imprisonment rates of those who participated in correctional education programmes, with the average incarceration cost per inmate assuming an average length of stay of 2.4 years estimated to be $67,975 to $75,086.

Therefore, the direct costs of reimprisonment were far greater than the direct costs of providing correctional education.

More specifically, for a correctional education programme to be cost-effective or break even, the review estimated that it would need to reduce the three-year reimprisonment rate by between 1.9 percentage points and 2.6 percentage points.

Given that the findings of the review indicate that participation in correctional education programmes is associated with a 13% reduction in the risk of reimprisonment for three years following release, correctional education programmes appear to far exceed the break even point in reducing risks.

The review authors also noted that the results are likely to be conservative because they do not include the indirect costs of reimprisonment.

Finally, the review noted that while computer assisted instruction is potentially less costly to administer than traditional instruction, there is no evidence that this kind of educational style is significantly better than traditional instruction.

General considerations

- Since the studies from the reviews were conducted in the USA, the findings are difficult to generalise to the UK context.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that education and skills training programmes in correctional facilities have reduced crime, but there is some evidence from two studies that they have increased crime.

Ex-prisoners who participated in the programmes had a 13% lower risk of reoffending, as well as a 13% higher change of obtaining employment upon release.

By giving inmates more education and skills, these programmes are designed to increase employability in the belief that this will decrease the likelihood of reoffending once released.

The programmes appear to be cost effective in the USA.

Those with a post-release component appeared to be particularly effective in assisting the transition back into the community.

Reviews

Review one

Quality of evidence			
Mechanism **How it works**	**Moderator** **Where it works**	**Implementation** **How to do it**	**Economic cost** **What it costs**
■■□□ Moderate	■■□□ Moderate	■□□□ Low	No information

Reference

- Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J. and Miles, J. N. V. (2013) '**Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults**', RAND corporation report, available at

http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

Review two

Quality of evidence			
Mechanism **How it works**	**Moderator** **Where it works**	**Implementation** **How to do it**	**Economic cost** **What it costs**
■■□□ Moderate	■■□□ Moderate	■□□□ Low	No information

Reference

- Wilson, D. B., Gallagher, C. A. and MacKenzie, D. L. (2000) '**A meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation and work programs for adult offenders**', Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 37:4, 347-368

Summary prepared by

This narrative was prepared by UCL Jill Dando Institute and was co-funded by the College of Policing and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

Return to the toolkit

Tags

- Crime reduction