

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/learning-behind-bars-the-effectiveness-of-education-in-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Each year, more than 700,000 people are released from our nations prisons, but within three years of release, four out of 10 of them end up back in prison because theyve committed new crimes or violated the terms of their release. One strategy for closing this revolving door is to provide education to inmates while incarcerated so they have the knowledge, training, and skills to support a successful return to their communities.

Preparing individuals coming out of prison with the needed vocational skills and education to successfully reintegrate back into society is challenging. Formerly incarcerated individuals, on average, are less educated than the general population. Many lack a high school diploma or GED certificate and the occupational skills needed to succeed in the labor force. Further, the stigma of having a felony conviction on ones record is often a key barrier to finding employment after prison. Adding to these difficulties, many states were hard hit by the 2008 recession with education and vocational training programs within prisons experiencing deep funding cuts limiting critical rehabilitation opportunities for inmates.

The picture isnt entirely dire. The good news is that there is strong evidence that correctional education programs do work. The RAND Corporation undertook a national study of correctional education that included a comprehensive review of the scientific literature and a meta-analysis of correctional education programs provided within the U.S. spanning 58 studies published between 1980 and 2011.

In looking across these studies, we determined that inmates who participate in correctional education programs were 43 percent less likely to return to prison within three years of release than those who did not participate. This translates into a 13percentage-point reduction in the risk of recidivating.

We also looked at the specific types of academic education programs. For example, we found that participation in postsecondary education programs reduces an inmates risk of recidivating by 16 percentage points compared to those who do not participate. This finding is particularly important, as innovative initiatives such as Veras[Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#)aim to provide college coursework and supportive reentry services to prepare participating inmates to continue on to college following release.

Not only are such released inmates less likely to return to prison, they are also more likely to find employment after release: The odds of finding employment was 13 percent higher among prisoners who participated in either academic or vocational education programs than for those who did not. And those who participated in vocational training programs specifically had odds of obtaining post-release employment that were 28-percent higher than individuals who had not participated in such programs. Getting former inmates into the mainstream labor force is a critical goal for criminal justice officials, and our study highlights the value of educational services for inmates in achieving this goal. As technology, modes of communication, and the needs of employers change rapidly, education remains an important means to ensure that inmates are prepared for the challenges of the 21st century work place.

Given continuing budget constraints, policymakers and correctional administrators also want to know whether the costs of providing such programs are worth the gains in lower recidivism. There is good news on that front as well. Our analyses suggest that prison education programs are indeed cost-effective, saving \$4 to \$5 in three-year reincarceration costs for every \$1 invested. With evidence supporting both improvements in the post-release prospects of former inmates and the cost-savings to society that comes with it, our study underscores the value of educational programming in correctional facilities.

*[Lois Davis, Ph.D.](#) and [Robert Bozick, Ph.D.](#) are the lead authors of the RAND report *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* which can be found at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html Davis and Bozick also are the evaluators for the Vera Institute of Justices *Pathways from Prison to Post-Secondary Education* project.*

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