

**IT'S A BIRD,
IT'S A PLANE,
IT'S . . . EDUCATION?
Education as a Solution to Crime**

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INTRODUCTION

When we think of crime-fighters, we generally think of the Supermans or the Batmans or the Wonder Womans, not education. Education doesn't dress in spandex, come with cool crime-fighting gadgets or fly across the skies, but that doesn't mean we should dismiss it as a means by which we can tackle the issue of the rising numbers of prisoners in the United States and the financial burden placed on the shoulders of the taxpayers who pay for their containment. The United States has recently experienced a boom in the prison population, in part due to an inordinately high re-arrest rate, also known as recidivism. This growing problem can be tackled by expanding prison education systems, which were slashed as part of the get-tough-on-crime movement of the early 1990s. Expanding the number of educational programs in the prison system, both secondary and post-secondary, will result in a decrease in both recidivism and the cost of maintaining the correctional system. Legislation must be passed which awards rehabilitation through education in our prisons, rather than the current deprivation of opportunity.

AN ILLITERATE PRISON SYSTEM

That the United States has an expanding prison population is beyond a doubt; the Center on Crime, Community and Culture has reported that while the crime rate has remained essentially flat, the U.S. prison population has tripled since 1980, with one out of every 37 Americans alive today having served time in a state or federal prison.¹ This is augmented by an increasingly high recidivism rate, which hovers around 60% nationwide and ranges to as high as 71% in Oklahoma.² To make matters worse, this high recidivism rate has created a culture of imprisonment, as studies show that a child with a recidivist father is 92 times more likely to end up in prison than a child whose father doesn't go

¹ Hrabowski and Robbi, Page 96 and Shrum, Page 226.

² "A Possible Reprieve for Prisoner Higher Education," Page 32.

back to jail.³ Thus, for many Americans, prison becomes an all too familiarly repeated component of their lives.

This overcrowded and ever-expanding United States prison system is made up of a poorly educated prison body. 70% of those entering the prison system have not completed high school while 16.4% have had no high school education at all.⁴ Many inmates are unable to function in the outside world. 19% of adult inmates are illiterate, while another 41% characterized as functionally illiterate, meaning they can't read well enough to aide them in their work environment or navigate a city transportation system. These numbers are in stark comparison to the 4% of the general population that is illiterate with only another 19% characterized as functionally illiterate.⁵ This lack of education has had direct effects on the recidivist cycle, as prisoners who are freed from jail have no opportunities for legitimate employment, and often return to their illicit ways. One of the key ways to break this cycle has proven to be education within the prison system.

A HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Prison education has been a tried and tested policy throughout our nation's history. The first example of formal prison education in the United States came in 1789, when a Philadelphia clergyman named William Rogers began offering Bible classes to prisoners in the Walnut Street jail. Over the subsequent century, prison education expanded across the country and generally involved teaching prisoners to read the Bible so they could repent their sins and be saved. This began to change in the late 1800s, as the Industrial Revolution created a demand for skilled workers to operate machinery. Prisons soon

³ Shrum, Page 226.

⁴ Hrabowski and Robbi, Page 97.

⁵ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 4.

developed vocational schools for inmates to prepare them for work in the factories that sprung up all over the United States.⁶

Zebulon Brockway has come to represent this great step in the creation of prison education systems. As the first superintendent of the Elmira prison in New York in 1869, Brockway made education programs a fundamental aspect of his rehabilitation effort, writing, “The great thought is that the whole process of reformation is education, not meaning by that term the injection of information without assimilation, but the drawing out to its full natural and normal limit of every faculty of the body, mind and soul of every man who passes through the institution.”⁷ Brockway, echoed by reformers across the nation, began to introduce a more classical education to prisons alongside the religious and vocational training that was more commonplace. Austin MacCormick, the Assistant Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, spoke for this generation of reformers when he wrote, “The philosophy of education for adult prisoners is to consider the prisoner as primarily an adult in need of education and secondarily as a criminal in need of reform.”⁸

These prison education systems soon became hotbeds for education development, as Brockway, MacCormick and others began to experiment with new kinds of education with their prisoners. One of the most innovative developments of prison education was individual based learning, which emphasized catering education to each students needs,

⁶ Messemer, Page 32.

⁷ Wormley, Page 425.

⁸ Wormley, Page 425. MacCormick’s mentor was Thomas Osborne, a millionaire industrialist who began his career in correctional facility education by posing as a prisoner in a New York prison for several months so he could get an “inside” look at the reforms needed. He seized upon education as the key component and dedicated his life to expanding its place in prison systems, a passion he passed on to MacCormick.

not those of the mass body. Prisons, naturally split up into smaller groups due to the physical, concrete barriers between inmates, were naturally more interested in individualized progress than the public education system. In the early twentieth century, Lewis Lawes, a warden at a New York prison, undertook an extensive study of his prisoners to try and detect why they were able to make progress with their education in prison while generally failing in the public school system. He concluded that the individualized education offered in prisons was in fact superior to the mass education offered in public schools. Public school officials soon caught on and began to make individual instruction a larger part of the public educational effort.⁹ In 1939, William Grady, the New York City superintendent of schools, emphasized the importance of prison education when he wrote, “The pioneers in classification and individualization of personality were the prisons rather than the schools. My hat’s off to the prisons!”¹⁰ Thus, prisoner education has served as an important resource for the general education system throughout its history.

This contribution was recognized in 1965, when Congress passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which provided federal funding for prison education systems, in particular those addressing post-secondary education. An important aspect of this was the access prisoners got to Pell Grants, which allowed the generally impoverished criminals the opportunity to finance their college courses. With the support of the federal government, education systems in prisons rapidly expanded, as soon 350 post-secondary programs populated over 90% of the states.¹¹ Secondary programs also expanded, as

⁹ Kendall, Page 361.

¹⁰ Correctional Education Association website

¹¹ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 6.

federal funding allowed more and more prisoners the opportunity to receive educational training in prison. In short, federal funding was an integral part of an expanding web of prison education.

THE BUBBLE BURSTS: AMERICA GETS TOUGH ON CRIME

Prison education was not to last forever though. The crack epidemic of the late 1980s made getting tough on crime a popular sentiment among politicians. It became easy to run for political office with promises to put police on the street and stop coddling criminals; in fact, getting tough on crime was a key component of the 1988 Bush presidential election victory. This new attitude towards criminals began to target education programs, particularly post-secondary opportunities. As tuition skyrocketed in the 80s and 90s, jumping to an average of \$1,194 semester in 1994, a 331% increase over twenty years, politicians began to object to inmates receiving funds that could go to non-criminals.¹² In April of 1994, Congress finally acted, passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which included provisions that cut prison education spending and denied all prisoners access to Pell Grant funds, though prisoners received less than one percent of all Pell Grant funds.¹³

With the passage of this act, prison education systems no longer had a source of funding for prison education programs. The loss of federal funds was soon accompanied by a loss of state funding as many states, led by New York and South Carolina, also cut funding for education in prisons and cut all college courses. Most programs collapsed without this governmental funding; while New York had 70 post-secondary programs in January of 1994, within four months of the passage of the U.S. Congressional Act all but

¹² Wright, Page 13.

¹³ Wright, Page 11.

four had closed due to a lack of funding by August.¹⁴ This trend was repeated around the country, as over two-thirds of correctional departments reported that “the elimination of Pell Grants eliminated most if not all of their college course opportunities for inmates.”¹⁵ Thus, while America has a long history of innovative and comprehensive prison education, she is presently owner of a prison system that provides very few educational opportunities for its inmates, especially when it comes to post-secondary programs.

THE BENEFITS OF PRISON EDUCATION

This scarcity becomes increasingly difficult to understand when taken into consideration with the proven benefits of education for rehabilitation efforts. One inmate attested to the need for an education in order to succeed in the outside world when he told a researcher, “We already know you ain’t going nowhere without at least a GED, you ain’t going to do nothing. You got to have it. You going to be in the penitentiary for life, in and out.”¹⁶ GED and literacy programs are a pivotal way to change the fate of released prisoners. A Study by the Arizona Department of Adult Probation concluded that prisoners with literacy training had a 35% re-arrest rate while the control group had a 46% recidivism rate.¹⁷ This result has been mimicked in multiple studies across the nation. Since many of our prisoners are unable to read and haven’t obtained a high school diploma, these programs in our prisons become an excellent way to rehabilitate prisoners and make them productive members of society.

The successes wrought by prison education are even more dramatic when a prisoner takes part in a post-secondary education program. A 1994 Texas study showed

¹⁴ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 7.

¹⁵ Taylor, Page 7. U

¹⁶ Schlesinger, Page 238.

¹⁷ Hrabowski and Robbi, Page 98.

that 7.8% of prisoners who completed a college education in prison recidivated upon release in comparison with 43% of the general prison population.¹⁸ This trend holds up nationally as “inmates with at least two years of college have a 10% re-arrest rate, compared to a national re-arrest rate of approximately 60%.”¹⁹ Yet the federal and state cuts on funding have had a dramatic effect on prisoner achievement. Prison departments have had to explore private modes of funding; in one state, prisoners must pay the state back the full cost of any educational training they receive while in prison.²⁰ Funding limits have sapped state rehabilitation efforts by cutting educational programs in prisons.

This leads to prisoners having difficulty finding gainful employment after incarceration. Prisons give each inmate an Educational Achievement score upon their arrival in prison. Scores below 4.0 signal that the prisoner is illiterate, those below 6.0 are functionally illiterate while those above 6.0 are considered literate.

EA Score	<4.0	4.0-5.9	6.0-7.4	7.5-8.9	9.0+
Percent Employed One Year After Release	57%	67%	71%	74%	75%
Average Wages Earned	\$7,697	\$7,588	\$8,128	\$8,574	\$10,139

The chart above testifies as to how these education scores affect a released prisoner’s chances at finding a job and earning enough money to live on. An increase in the number of educational opportunities in our prisons would lead to an increase in ex-felon employment.²¹

¹⁸ “A Possible Reprieve for Prisoner Higher Education,” Page 32. The Texas penal system, often characterized by the left as backward due to its large prison body and frequent use of the death penalty, is one of the most enlightened in terms of prison education. It is one of a select few states that fully fund a prison education system with taxpayer dollars, and has reaped the benefits with a significantly lower recidivism rate than the national average.

¹⁹ Chappell, Page 150.

²⁰ Messemer, Page 32.

²¹ Fabelo, Page 109.

THE BENEFITS OF PRISON EDUCATION

In addition to being beneficial for prisoners, the drop in recidivism rates is highly beneficial to the taxpayers themselves. The cost of incarcerating prisoners is enormously expensive. Studies have estimated that each cell costs over \$100,000 to construct with an additional \$30-50,000 per year per prisoner in general maintenance fees.²² Thus, anything that would reduce the number of prisoners in our prison systems would save Americans money. Recent trends to address this have led to murders and rapists freed when they are nearing the end of their lives in order to save money, additional time off for good behavior and other tactics that do little to address rehabilitation issues. Too little attention has been paid to the enormous savings that could be gained with an investment in prisoner education. While the cost of incarcerating 100 individuals for ten years is \$10 million, an additional \$1 million investment could give those same prisoners a full four-year college education.²³ With a lower recidivism rate, the state would save money. Utah recently commissioned a study addressing this issue, assessing two similar groups of prisoners, one of whom received college education while the other did not. It found that the prisoners who received education were less likely to end up back in prison and saved the state \$20 million dollars, while only \$10 million had been spent on the program.²⁴ This study is by no means alone. The Department of Education paid the Correctional Education Association to do a study on the issue, and discovered that every dollar spent on education returned two dollars to state coffers.²⁵ The state of Florida found that it got \$1.66 back on every dollar invested in education regardless of whether

²² Shrum, Page 225.

²³ Hrabowski and Robbi, Page 96.

²⁴ "A Possible Reprieve for Prisoner Higher Education," Page 4.

²⁵ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 4.

or not the prisoner completed the program, while it saved \$3.53 per dollar with completion.²⁶ Thus, it is imperative that the United States begin investing in its prison education systems, both to help rehabilitate its prisoners and to save itself the wasteful expenditures associated with building more prisons and incarcerating more repeat offenders.

THE RACIAL ASPECT

Like No Child Left behind, which focuses not only on achievement but also on social equity, an increase in prison education funding would not only rehabilitate prisoners but also signal a move towards solving the equity issues that plague our country. The United States Department of Justice has estimated that 44% of black prison inmates and 53% of Hispanic inmates have not graduated from high school, compared to 27% of white inmates.²⁷ These numbers become even more uneven when comparisons are made concerning college education. Education programs in prisons are an excellent way to help alleviate societal issues surrounding racial inequality, as minorities are more likely to benefit from these programs than their white counterparts. Thus, “the elimination of prisoner education has a major and disproportionate impact on African Americans” and other minorities.²⁸ The effects of this are aptly shown in the testimony of one black prisoner in California. “When I was sent to the State Penitentiary I was twenty-six – the quintessential angry young black male. However, there was a very different attitude toward rehabilitation. I was able to take college courses for a number of years on a Pell grant. Vocational training was available and literacy was encouraged. But things began to change a few years later . . . When Congress outlawed Pell grants for prisoners the

²⁶ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 8.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, Page 6.

²⁸ “A Possible Reprieve for Prisoner Higher Education,” Page 31.

message became clear: We don't really give a damn if you change or not."²⁹ The need for prison education thus becomes a racial issue, as well as a rehabilitation and cost issue.

POLICY OPTIONS

This essay makes the lack of funding for prison education seem insensible, and indeed it is. However, there is one formidable barrier to enacting any change that needs to be dismantled. It is currently very difficult to run for political office in the United States with any sort of agenda that includes policy that can be deemed as "coddling prisoners." These policies are too easily labeled a waste of time; after all, why should we spend money educating murderers, thieves and rapists when that money could be put toward educating non-felons or social security or a tax cut? The numbers and logic that make this case so compelling become lost in the clamor of voices that consistently rise against any sort of aid towards prisoners. Thus, one of the key components of any effort to bring back prison education programs must be a strong push to convince legislators, governors and presidents that the issue deserves action. Groups like the Correctional Education Association must be formed and supported in order to more strongly advocate for change. Phone calls, e-mails and letters to policy makers must be placed to bring the issue to the forefront of the American agenda. It will take a strong grassroots effort to enact any meaningful reform.

This agenda should include a return to federal funding for GED and college instruction in our prisons, especially the Pell Grants. The Department of Education has stated "higher education prevented people from returning to crime, and transformed them into skilled workers who contribute to the economy."³⁰ Congress needs to take this

²⁹ Wright, Page 14.

³⁰ Karpowitz and Kenner, Page 6.

advice, which many states have echoed, and start financing these programs again. Individual states like South Carolina, which has passed a law forbidding its inmates from receiving college education while in prison, need to follow along and remove these insensible laws. Steps should also be taken to make education mandatory. Several judges across the United States have experimented with making educational achievement part of their sentencing while prison departments have also used incentives like time off for educational achievement. With proper funding and innovative incentive techniques, America's prison system could dwindle in size at the same speed with which her literacy rate climbs.

It is also important to begin networking educational programs in prisons with job opportunities in the outside world. It is often too difficult for prisoners, educated or not, to obtain employment due to their criminal past at the time when it is most critical that they find a licit source of funds. Vocational and literacy training should make previously unskilled inmates more attractive to employers, who could contract with the state prisons to employ these prisoners once they are released. College educated prisoners also need help in gaining access to jobs which allow them to utilize their newly honed skills. By coupling employment opportunities with prison education, recidivism rates could plummet to record lows.

AN EXAMPLE

It is important to realize that instantaneous sweeping societal changes occur only in the minds of idealists and the criminally insane. The process of enhancing federal and state funding for prison education systems will take time. However, it is possible to use private initiatives to stimulate a more rapid and more complete funding boom. In 2001, a Bard College graduate named Max Kenner spent the summer after he finished school

driving around the country to visit prisons and, by interviewing wardens, staff and the prisoners themselves, discover what they needed in order to more effectively educate their prisoners. He then founded the Bard Prison Initiative, which works to provide both funding and teachers for prison programs. Kenner's organization links wealthy donors with the program while also utilizing the graduating college population as a resource for training teachers to teach inside the prisons. This organization has helped bring privately funded prison education systems to dozens of prisons in the New York area.

A simple way to ensure that federal and state dollars are being used wisely and quickly would be to initially channel these newly-won funds through organizations like the Bard Prison Initiative, providing them with the resources to continue their successes. In effect, the government becomes simply a bigger donor to fund the programs. Then, once the education systems are working in the prisons, they can be transitioned over to governmental control. This will ensure that funding increases quickly obtain results that can then be used to pursue more taxpayer investments while also utilizing Kenner's system of providing teachers to staff the programs and make sure they operate smoothly. Thus, quick reforms are not impossible as the programs needed to make the ideal the real already exist on a smaller private scale; these resources beg to be tapped.

CONCLUSION

Thus, education is one of the main ways in which the United States could address its crime problem. An uneducated prison body with time on its hands sits in millions of cells scattered across the nation. Too often, these prisoners have bounced in and out of prisons throughout their lives, as they have little hope of obtaining licit employment. Educating these prisoners so they can get their GREs and college degrees would not only help rehabilitation efforts, but also end up saving the U.S. taxpayer millions of dollars

and make strides towards alleviating the effects of the racial inequality that plagues our inner cities. This goal is not unthinkable or even very difficult to obtain; all it would take is an increase in funding for programs by our politicians and America could make these progressive policies a reality. Perhaps a prisoner summed up the exciting possibilities best when she wrote, “I had to come to prison to get an education. We learned about irony in our writing class. This is irony. But it has a happy ending. My children will come to my graduation here in Bedford Hills, and then when I am released I will go to their college graduation. That is not irony. That is hope.”³¹

³¹ Hrabowski and Robbi, Pages 98-99.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Below, I have grouped my bibliography into four sections in order to aid further study. However, before separating my resources, it is vital to emphasize two resources which proved invaluable and cannot be broken down categorically. The Journal of Correctional Education is the main sources of scholarship in the field and serves as an invaluable forum for discussion and networking. In addition, the Correctional Education Association is step one in any foray into the field of prison education reform and proved highly useful in framing this essay.

Correctional Education Association. 2004. Stephen Steurer. November 9th, 2005.
<http://www.ceanational.com>.

The historical background for prison education systems is fascinating and under-documented. The following sources were the ones I found most useful in crafting a narrative of prisoner education in the United States. This subcategory of the prison education system issue leaves plenty of room for further study.

Davidson, Howard. "An Alternative View of the Past: Revisiting the Mutual Welfare League." Journal of Correctional Education 46 (1995): 169-174.

Messemer, Jonathon E. "College Programs for Inmates: The Post-Pell Grant Era." Journal of Correctional Education. 54 (2003): 32-39.

Wright, Mary P. "Pell Grants, Politics and the Penitentiary: Connections Between the Development of U.S. Higher Education and Prisoner Post-Secondary Programs." Journal of Correctional Education 52 (2001): 11-16.

The following sources deal with the ways in which prisoners are effected by education systems on an individual level. These are especially useful in dealing with the racial aspects of prison education reform. These resources are very useful for examining the issue on a personal, rather than systematic level.

"A Possible Reprieve for Prisoner Higher Education." Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 10 (1995): 31-32.

Holtz, Robert J. "Makarenko and Dewey: Two Views on Overcoming Life Circumstances Through Education." Journal of Correctional Education 53 (2002): 116-119.

Schlesinger, Raphael. "Better Myself: Motivation of African Americans to Participate in Correctional Education." Journal of Correctional Education 56 (2005): 228-252.

Wormley, Margaret J. "Adult Education in Federal Prisons." Journal of Negro Education 14 (1945): 425-430.

This group of resources document the statistical evidence that was used to prove the benefits of prison education on recidivism. These tend to be statistical studies by various states and academics and are the basis for the argument in favor of prison education systems.

Chappell, Cathryn A. "Post-Secondary Correctional Education and Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis of Research Conducted 1990-1999." Journal of Correctional Education 55 (2004): 148-169.

Fabelo, Tony. "The Impact of Prison Education on Community Reintegration of Inmates: The Texas Case." Journal of Correctional Education 53 (2002): 106-110.

Karpowitz, Daniel and Kenner, Max. "Education as Crime Prevention: The Case for Reinstating Pell Grant Eligibility for the Incarcerated." Bard College Press, Annandale-on-Hudson 2004.

Linton, John. "United States Department of Education Update." Journal of Correctional Education 56 (2005): 197-198.

U.S. Department of Justice. "Educational and Correctional Populations." 2003

These last set of articles concern the ways in which prison education reform can, have and should be implemented. These articles tend towards the persuasive, utilizing data sources like those listed above in order to influence public policy. These are an important resource for crafting a public policy initiative.

Hrabowski, Freeman A. and Jeremy Robbi. "The Benefits of Correctional Education." Journal of Correctional Education 53 (2002): 96-100.

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Khatibi, Manoucheher and Grande, Carolyn. "Correctional Education Planning: A Systematic Approach to Vocational Training." Journal of Correctional Education 44 (1993): 152-154.

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Taylor, Jon Marc. "Alternative Funding Options for Post-Secondary Correctional Education (Part One)." Journal of Correctional Education 56 (2005): 6-17.

Taylor, Jon Marc. "Alternative Funding Options for Post-Secondary Correctional Education (Part Two)." Journal of Correctional Education 56 (2005): 216-227.