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Research Findings on Adult Corrections Programs: A Review

INTRODUCTION

What is known about the effectiveness of adult correctional programs in reducing recidivism?

This report summarizes findings on this question, including programs focused on both the institutional and community settings. Literature published in the United States and Canada is reviewed.

A subsequent report to the Department will address the comparative costs and benefits of major types of interventions, taking into account the state's expenditures on its criminal justice system.

The material is divided into seven topics:¹

- Substance abuse treatment,
- Education,
- Employment,
- Sex offender treatment,
- Cognitive behavioral treatment,
- Life skills training, and
- Intensive supervision.

Three General Findings

1. Does Anything Work? *Yes, but the results are often modest.*

We found some programs have achieved success in lowering the chance that adult offenders will commit new crimes. Other approaches have failed to reduce these odds. Because most programs have not been evaluated rigorously, a substantial amount of uncertainty persists about many interventions.

¹ We have not covered research on the intersection of policing and corrections, courts and corrections, the effect of deterrence and incapacitation in sentencing policies, and boot camps. Although we attempted to find evaluations for other areas of correctional programming such as family attachment (family ties during imprisonment, relationship enhancement, mother/infant programs, parental education) and community transition (furloughs, prerelease programs, day reporting centers), few evaluations have been conducted on these topics. The studies we found relied on very weak designs, thus, they are not summarized.

Even programs with the most favorable outcomes demonstrate success rates that many would consider modest. We found the most successful interventions for adult offenders lower the chance of re-offending by 10 to 15 percent. An example can help put this number in perspective. In Washington State, about 50 percent of all adult offenders leaving prison are subsequently re-convicted for another felony offense after eight years from release.² A 10 to 15 percent reduction from a 50 percent starting point would result in a 43 to 45 percent recidivism rate, a significant reduction but not a cure.

Thus the answer to the simple question “Does Anything Work?” is yes—some programs have been shown to lower the odds of criminal offending, but the success rates of even the best programs are relatively modest.

2. Are Successful Interventions Also Cost-Effective? *Some are, some are not.*

The follow-up to the “does anything work” question is an economic one: are the programs that have been shown to lower the rate of criminal behavior also cost-effective? That is, do they save more money than they cost? The Institute will present a separate report to the department of corrections describing our conclusions on this subject.

One way to think about this question is this: how successful does a program need to be in order to break even? A simple back-of-the-envelope example can illustrate this point. The present-value cost to taxpayers for the typical adult offender leaving prison who is re-convicted for an average felony is about \$30,000. If a program costs \$1,000 per participant, then that program needs one success out of every 30 offenders in the program. We know from our recidivism research, however, that without the program about half of these 30 offenders will be felony recidivists after leaving prison. This means that the program needs a success rate of just one out of fifteen recidivist offenders. In percentage terms the program needs just a 6.7 percent success rate (1/15) to break-even with taxpayers. If the program achieves a recidivism reduction greater than a 6.7 percent, then the taxpayer gets a positive return. So, because the cost of failure is high in adult corrections, a program can be economically attractive if it can achieve quite small reductions in recidivism. As we found in this review of the literature, a number of programs have been shown to achieve reductions in recidivism above this level, others have not.

Thus the quick answer to the question “Are successful interventions also cost-effective?” Is that some are and others are not. Like any investment strategy, the goal is to pick winners and avoid losers. Again, a subsequent report to the department will describe the precise economic analysis we have undertaken on the economics of adult corrections programs.

3. Most Criminal Justice Programs Have Not Been—But Should Be—Evaluated.

In Washington, as in the rest of the United States, most programs designed to reduce crime have not been rigorously evaluated. Some interventions may be working and we don’t know it, while others may not be effective yet absorb scarce tax dollars that could better be directed toward effective programs.

² The 50 percent felony recidivism rate is based on a recidivism analysis the Institute conducted for the Department of Corrections.

We found that in the broad arena of adult corrections, many questions related to effective programs cannot be answered. Carefully constructed evaluations can help the state assess which programs are valuable investments and which are not. We believe a place to start is to evaluate existing programs, using strong research designs that allow for more definitive findings.³ We agree with Prendergast and colleagues (1995) that the key policy question is not "what works," but what works most cost-effectively for which types of offenders, under which conditions, and in which settings. We believe the state is in a good position to make headway on this knowledge gap, given the diversity of its programs and offenders.

³ Research designs of a level 4 or 5 (see page 7 of full report).