

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE
Pursuant to P.A. 245 of 2008
Section 908 (2)
Prison Academic and Vocational Programs

Section 908 (2) of P.A. 245 of 2008 requires that “the Department of Corrections shall provide the senate and house appropriations subcommittees on corrections, the senate and house fiscal agencies, and the state budget director with statistical reports on the efficacy of both departmental-provided general education and vocational education programs in reducing offender recidivism rates.”

Relationship Between GED, Vocational Training and Recidivism

National Research Findings

Over many years, research in other jurisdictions has established that, while education and employment programs can impact recidivism, the relationship is complex and must be studied in the broader context of offender needs and causes of their criminality. An Urban Institute report (Solomon, et al, 2004) notes that “(b)ecause the link between employment and crime is complicated by other factors, including housing, health care and drug treatment, employment is only one component of a multifaceted approach to assist returning prisoners.” The study continues on to note “Programs ... that are multi-modal in nature are, in general, more likely to be effective than those that are not. Thus, if an inmate has vocational needs as well as substance abuse and life skills (including educational) needs, the efficacy of any one of these interventions is enhanced even more if treatment and services are well integrated” Put simply, studying one program in isolation is less likely to produce evidence of a strong relationship with outcomes than looking at combinations of treatments and programs.

Even looking at education and vocational programs alone, encouraging results are found in research studies produced in many venues.

- A frequently cited study by Wilson, Gallagher and MacKenzie (Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 2000) found that “(analyzing) the recidivism outcomes of 33 independent experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of education, vocation and work programs ... found that program participants recidivate at a lower rate than nonparticipants.”
- The 2004 Urban Institute research summary (Solomon, et al, 2004) concluded that “In general, participants in prison-based educational, vocational, and work-related programs are more successful – that is, they commit fewer crimes and are employed more often and for longer periods of time after release – than are nonparticipants.”
- A study from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Aos, et al, 2001) assessed the cost benefit of educational programs in prisons and determined that there is a benefit to cost ratio of \$5.65 from reduced crime for each dollar spent on educational programs. This savings is the result of “... a significant effect size of about -.11 for recidivism.”
- The Washington study also looked at the benefits of vocational programs. Their findings indicate that there is “... a significant effect of about -.13 for recidivism.” Their analysis

translates that effect in "... a combined taxpayer and crime victim benefit of \$7.13 for every dollar spent."

- A Texas study (Gerber and Fritsch, 1994) found that "research shows a fair amount of support for the hypothesis that adult academic and vocational programs lead to ... reductions in recidivism and increases in employment opportunities."
- A research summary from the New York University Law School (Bushway, 2003) notes the importance of programs considered together. "The effects of work programs and training programs are roughly equivalent." The summary goes on to note "... the studies with the largest employment effect tended also to have the largest reduction in recidivism." Regarding the importance of programs targeted at offender attitudes, motivation and thinking patterns, the study states "Any program that hopes to cause large scale change must focus on changing an individual's preferences or fundamental orientation changes."

Michigan Findings

The following information relates only to the relationship between academic and vocational programs and recidivism. For reasons outlined above, these simple associations between single programs and ultimate outcomes should be viewed with caution because they fail to fully capture the true complexity of factors that determine success or failure on parole.

Per Section 408 of Public Act 245 of 2008, the department is required to measure recidivism for at least a three year period following release from prison. A standardized three-year follow up period requires that offenders released from prison only up through the end of Calendar Year 2005 be included for the assessment of recidivism. The first cohort of MPRI cases began being released in late 2005 so, at this point, there are not a sufficient number of cases with a three-year follow period to allow for reliable assessment of the relationship between MPRI, education, vocational programming and others factors and offender outcomes. As a result, this report contains a summary of the general relationship between academic and vocational programs and recidivism from a previously conducted report on a sample of 2002 parolees. Future reports will assess recidivism outcomes relative to programs and MPRI once a sufficient number of cases with full follow up periods have accumulated.

Design and Methodology

Results reported in the table below include 547 Prisoners who paroled in September and October 2002. Half the sample consists of parolees that had a completed vocational program. The remainder of the sample is comprised of an equal sized random sample of parolees from the same period who had no vocational program completions. Educational and Vocational data were obtained from OMNI, OETS, and prisoner files for prisoners paroled during this period and matched to cases in this report to determine their educational and program completions. Then vocational program completions were reviewed. A review of OETS vocational data showed that there was a need to supplement and check the OETS data by the review of physical files. Recidivism was measured over a standard two year follow up period.

Limitations

This report was limited to reviews of academic and vocation programs and does not consider other barriers to community transitions such as substance abuse, mental illness, and other confounding factors. For example, over half of the parolees in this report had indicators for substance abuse dependence. Because the offender Education Tracking System (OETS) was not implemented until July 2004, data on GED and vocational programs was in large part collected from paper files. In addition, standards for program completion were not clear during the entire period reviewed. These standards are being refined and clarified on an ongoing basis as OETS usage expands. Also, the effectiveness of OETS is dependent on the roll out of the Offender Callout Management System (OCMS) data base. The Department of Information Technology (DIT) developed OCMS and OETS to run complementarily. Thus, OETS will run more efficiently and accurately upon the complete implementation of OETS statewide.

Findings

Table 1 shows comparative recidivism rates for parolees that completed GEDs while in prison, those that completed at least one vocational program during their incarceration and parolees that completed both a GED and vocational programming.

Findings indicate that offenders that completed a GED during their incarceration had a lower recidivism rate (48.3% vs. 48.7%) than the overall baseline rate. Similarly, offenders that completed a vocational program showed improvement over the baseline rate. Perhaps most significantly, offenders that completed BOTH a GED and a Vocational program showed the greatest improvement over the baseline. This result is consistent with the discussion earlier regarding the complexity and interrelationship between offenders’ needs. In this case, the combined effect of two programs exceeds the benefit from either program alone. As MPRI implementation moves forward and more of offenders higher level needs (e.g. housing, Substance Abuse treatment) are addressed along with educational requirements, these results are almost certain to show marked improvement.

Table 1
Comparison of Recidivism Rates for GED, Vocational, and Baseline*
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	GED Completed During Current Term	Vocational Program Completed during current term	Both GED and Voc Program completed during current term	Overall Baseline Recidivism Rate
No Recidivism	51.7%	53.9%	54.4%	51.3%
Recidivism	48.3%	46.1%	45.6%	48.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Based on a sample of offenders paroled in September and October 2002

I. Educational and Vocational Status of MPRI Participants

For reasons discussed above, this report cannot assess the combined effects of academic and vocational education and MPRI. However, it is of benefit to look at what current MPRI participants look like in terms of academic and vocational background.

Results summarized in Table 2 indicate that over three fourths of MPRI participants had a Diploma/GED, a Vocational Certificate or both. It is important to note that P.A. 320 specifically allows for waiver of the Diploma/GED requirement for a variety of specified reasons, including insufficient time to complete, previous employment, learning impairment and factors “at no fault of the prisoner’s own”.

Table 2
Vocational Training and GED for MPRI participants

	No GED	GED or Diploma Prior to Commitment	GED During Current Commitment	Total
No Vocational Training	1,609	2,410	1,461	5,480
Vocational Training	50	723	285	1,058
Total	1,659	3,133	1,746	6,538

VII. Summary

Results of research in Michigan and elsewhere in the country suggest that academic and vocational programs can positively impact offender reintegration and, as a consequence, reduce recidivism. Equally important are the consistent findings that considering academic and vocational programs in isolation can result in misleading and incomplete conclusions about their impact. These results strongly indicate that recidivism is a very complex phenomenon, influenced by a variety of factors working in combination. Thus, any strategy to reduce recidivism must address the issue with an equally complex and integrated approach. It is precisely that approach which provides the underpinnings of MPRI, which takes a holistic view of offenders’ risk, needs and strengths and targets a coordinated package of services, programs and interventions to improve their chances of making a successful transition back into society.