

Education in prisons

Increasing offenders' education or skill level to reduce reoffending and improve their employment prospects on release from prison. This summary is part of the [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#), which presents the best available research evidence on what works to reduce crime.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction, some rises	 Very strong	 Moderate	 Moderate	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Education and skills training programmes in prisons aim to increase the education or skill levels of participants to improve their employment prospects on release and reduce reoffending.

People in prison often have lower educational attainment than the general population and have fewer transferable skills. This is believed to limit their opportunities for employment and 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 prisons either by prison staff or outsourced to private providers.

This summary is based on three systematic reviews. Review one includes 58 studies, all of which were conducted in the USA, and contributes to all sections of this narrative.

Review two includes 33 studies and contributes to the Mechanism and Implementation sections. This review does not specify where the primary studies were carried out.

Review three includes 28 studies, 26 of which were carried out in the USA, one in the UK and one in Canada. This review contributes to the Mechanism section.

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 prisons 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 conducted a meta-analysis of 50 studies. This found that the odds of reoffending among inmates receiving correctional education are 64 percent of the odds of reoffending among inmates not receiving correctional education. This translates to a 13% reduction in the risk of reoffending.

Programme participants were also more likely to find employment after release, with the odds of obtaining employment post-release being 13% higher for those undertaking education than those who did not. This translates to a 0.9% improvement in post-release employment rates.

A meta-analysis of a subset of seven studies with the most rigorous research design found a slightly larger decrease in reoffending than the analysis of 50 studies.

How strong is the evidence?

Review one 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 considered any potential publication bias and only compared studies with similar methodologies and outcome measures.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The reviews suggested several ways in which education and skills training programmes might affect reoffending. They noted that low levels of educational attainment and/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 or may be forced to find lower-skilled jobs with lower hourly rates. Evidence suggests that offending may be reduced by ensuring ex-prisoners are more employable. Review two found that primary studies reporting larger effects for employment rates also tended to observe a reduction in reoffending.

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

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

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

Review one reported that they could not disentangle the effects of different types of educational programs on reoffending as prisoners could have participated in multiple programmes.

Review one found those who participated in vocational training had a 28% higher odds of obtaining employment post-release compared to those who did not participate. In comparison, individuals who participated in academic programmes had 8 percent higher odds of obtaining post-release employment than those individuals who did not participate. However these differences were not

statistically significant. Review one also found no statistically significant differences in test scores between computer-assisted instruction and more traditional methods.

Review two found post-secondary education had the largest effect, with vocational training and general educational diplomas showing more moderate effects on reducing reoffending.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

Administration and delivery of prison education differs across the USA. However, Review one and Review two noted that the most successful outcomes tend to offer multiple post-release components, follow up programming and focus on skills relevant to the job market. The better programmes also provide a continuity of support to assist ex-prisoners as they continue in education or enter the workforce.

One barrier to successful outcomes of the programme may be that any effects of these programmes 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 primary studies, Review one found information from other sources to calculate the costs and potential benefits of education and skills training programmes.

The average annual cost of education per participant was estimated to be between \$1,400 and \$1,744 (as of 2008). The average annual cost of imprisonment was estimated to be between \$28,323 and \$31,286 per prisoner. Therefore, for every 100 people in prison, the amount of money saved in costs between the two groups was estimated to be \$0.87–0.97 million. This was based on the lower re-imprisonment rates of those who participated in prison education programmes, with the average imprisonment cost per prisoner (assuming an average length of stay of 2.4 years) estimated to be between \$67,975 and \$75,086.

Therefore, the direct costs of re-imprisonment were far greater than the direct costs of providing prison education.

More specifically, for a prison education programme to be cost-effective, or break-even, the review estimated that it would need to reduce the three-year re-imprisonment rate by between 1.9 and 2.6 per cent.

Given that the review indicates that participation in prison education programmes is associated with a 13% reduction in the risk of re-imprisonment in the three years following release, prison 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 only consider the direct costs of re-imprisonment, and not the wider costs to the criminal justice system and society as a whole.

General considerations

Since the studies from the reviews were predominantly conducted in the USA, the findings may not be generalisable to the UK.

In addition to the presumed benefits of improving employment prospects and reducing future offending, Review two noted that work and education programmes are believed to reduce problem behaviours within institutions by providing constructive activities and a tool to reinforce positive behaviours.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that education and skills training programmes in prisons have reduced reoffending.

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 people in prison more education and skills, these programmes are designed to increase employability, which will in turn decrease the likelihood of reoffending once released.

Evidence from the USA suggests these programmes are cost effective.

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 LM and others. (2013) 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults', RAND corporation, 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
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Reference

- Wilson DB, Gallagher CA, and MacKenzie DL. (2000) 'A meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation and work programs for adult offenders', Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 37(4), pp 347-368, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427800037004001>.

Review three

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

Reference

Ellison M and others. (2017) 'A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in reducing recidivism and increasing employment', Probation Journal, 64(2), pp 108-128, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550517699290>.

Additional resources

Hill C. (2008). 'Inmate education programs', Corrections Compendium, 33(3), May/June.

Kyckelhahn T. (2012). 'State Corrections Expenditures, FY 1982–2010', U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, NCJ 239672, December 2012.

Henrichon C and Delaney R. (2012). 'The price of prisons: What incarceration costs taxpayers', Center on Sentencing and Corrections, Vera Institute of Justice, updated July 20, 2012.

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