College Education in Prisons

Mark Wilson  
Associate Professor of Economics  
West Virginia University Tech

3rd Annual Conference in World History and Economics  
Appalachian State University  
Boone, NC  
April 26, 2008
Abstract

It was recently reported that one percent of the adults in the United States are in jail. That is the highest rate of imprisonment of any developed country in the world. This high propensity to imprison has large effects on governmental budgets and elicits many questions about our criminal justice system.

This paper addresses higher education programs in U.S. prisons with special attention to the Southeast. College education in prison is done for 3 main reasons: to increase the human capital stock of prisoners; to improve prison life for reasons of safety and humane treatment; and to reduce recidivism.

This paper addresses three key issues about college education in prison: 1) Should prison education be expanded for the purpose of increasing human capital? 2) Should prison education be expanded for the purpose of humane treatment? 3) What has happened to federal and state funding of prison education in the past 15 years?

The paper observes prison funding has fallen steeply for the past 15 years. This reduction in funding is predicted to increase future recidivism and reduce current levels of prison safety.
1. Introduction

The movies depict life in prison as a series of softball games, cafeteria meals and escape plots. Those activities may be the major part of it. But a minor part of prison life is preparation for a life outside of the bars or a better life even when one can never get outside the bars. Sometimes this preparation is done by education. Prison education, especially college education, is the focus of this paper.

Before one can make a judgment about the proper level of prison education, it is appropriate to ask: Should there be any prison education at all? Are prisoners, those people who society has decided to put behind bars, entitled to anything beyond subsistence? Deciding the penal vs. rehabilitative purpose of prison education is the first objective of this paper. A quick-and-dirty test of prison spending is used to approximate how states currently feel about prison education.

The next issue is pedagogy. Assuming states think inmate education is a valuable commodity, how does education get delivered? This question discusses teacher selection, classrooms, academic resources and funding.

Finally, the paper looks at measurement of academic outcomes. This area is subject to broad interpretation due to the wide measure of outcomes available and the paucity of good data to measure these outcomes.

2. A Model of Prison Programming

After a person has been convicted of a crime and enters prison, life takes on new meaning. Choices are reduced in a profound way. This life of incarceration is
widespread in the U.S.: a 2008 study by the Pew Center on the States identified the U.S. as the country with the largest prison population in the world measured by prisoners per 1,000 citizens. Fully one percent of our adult population is behind bars and this fraction has grown in the past generation. The current prison population sits at 1.6 million adults (Pew, 2008). To house and maintain this huge number the U.S. needs facilities, workers and funding. In addition to facilities and workers, prisoners need activities. Inmates have about 14 hours per day of idle time and prison wardens, whether their mission is punishment or rehabilitation, must occupy the prisoners’ idle time. The flow chart in Figure 1 gives some possibilities.

The first step in occupying prisoners’ idle time occurs when the state decides whether rehabilitation or punishment is the main purpose of imprisonment. Usually the
mission includes both but, for the purposes of this paper, it is assumed only rehabilitation is important. If so, what are reasonable ways to rehabilitate prisoners? Figure 1 gives two general possibilities: recreation and education. Recreation seems non-controversial and is widespread. Our prison system has embraced basketball courts, softball games and weightlifting. Education, on the other hand, is more controversial and less widespread. The reasons for this seem clear: recreation does not cost a lot, provides opportunities for exercise and camaraderie and saves medical costs. Education, on the other hand, is generally regarded to have a distant stream of returns and those returns are more individual than societal. Thus, it seems likely that states make their decision to fund inmate education more cautiously than the decision to fund recreation.

State-level corrections data do not allow one to easily discern how much each state spends on inmate education. However gross corrections funding levels are available which give an estimate of corrections spending and, hence, prison education spending per state. Data for corrections spending levels are given in Table 1 for selected Southern states. The national average and the highest and lowest spending states are also given to provide a range. From the table it appears the Southern states in this small sample spend approximately the national average. Additionally, the table gives a sense of low-spending states (e.g., Alabama) which spends just 2.6 of its general fund on corrections whereas high-spending Oregon devotes 10.9 percent of its general fund. Regardless of what inmate programs we might contemplate, it seems clear that Oregon is spending

---

1 For this paper I assume state prisons are making the decision about the ratio of rehabilitation to punishment. Clearly, state and federal prisons have different ways to make this determination.
Table 1. Corrections Funding and Inmate Population 2007, Selected States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>% of General Fund</th>
<th>Inmates Per 1,000 Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama (lowest funding)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon (highest funding)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


more freely on corrections than Alabama. Reasons for this imbalance are unclear due to the highly aggregated data.

A shortcoming of comparing the percentage of the general fund spent on corrections is it makes no correction for the size of the prison population. A way to evaluate relative prison populations is to look at the rate of citizens locked-up per state. That information is also given in Table 1. A quick comparison reveals the percentage of the general fund spent on corrections is closely correlated with the number of inmates per 1,000 state residents. Again, the Southern states conform to this correlation rule whereas the extremes, Alabama and Oregon, deviate greatly from the correlation.

Although not rigorously determined, we see from this small data set that states vary in correctional spending and, hence, have different inclinations to spend on prison education.

Once corrections spending has been estimated, we must further stratify the spending into educational levels: secondary vs. higher education. A state could spend a considerable portion of its corrections budget on education, but spend all on GED education and nothing on college. Instead of developing a model, I will simply assume
that education budgets, once set by a state, are equally divided between GED and college education.

3. College Education in State Prisons

Since the majority of prisoners cannot read or write well enough to function in society, college education is not the biggest priority of prison education. Only 38 percent of state and federal prisoners have completed high school or a GED (Schmalleger and Smykla 2005). Nevertheless, there is a niche for college instruction for 4 main reasons: human capital formation, prisoner safety, to broaden the scope of prison activities and to reduce recidivism.

First, the general purpose of most education is human capital formation, an idea popularized by Chicago economist Gary Becker in the 1960’s. The human capital argument suggests education improves worker skills which improve income and wealth. Additionally, society benefits from positive spillovers. The same logic applies within a prison. If inmates are given additional training they will be better prepared for life after prison. And most prisoners return to society after imprisonment.² For these reasons, 90 percent of state prisons offered some type of educational programs in 2000 and 35 percent of eligible prisoners participated (Schmalleger and Smykla 2005).

A second reason to support prison education is inmate safety. This argument suggests that when prisoners have something to do they stay out of fights and trouble. The more taxing the activity the more the inmate is distracted from mischief. Data on this argument is hard to find so I make this argument more as conjecture than something empirically supported.

² At Mount Olive, the maximum security prison of West Virginia, 45 percent of the prisoners will eventually be released.
A third explanation for prison education is to broaden the range of acceptable activities. This argument suggests there is only so much volleyball an inmate can play. Some inmates like to read, some are philosophical and some like the challenge of education. Anecdotally, prisoners have discovered video games and that entertainment has emerged as the most popular pastime behind bars. For those inmates who like to read and think, college education offers a source of stimulation and enrichment. Broadening the range of acceptable prison activities can be supported on humanitarian grounds.

Fourth, and easiest to sell politically, educated prisoners have lower rates of recidivism. For the general prison population, the recidivism rate is about 50 percent (although this statistic is susceptible to large estimation errors). Recidivism rates of educated prisoners are far lower. According to the Center on Crime, Communities and Culture, inmates with at least two years of college have a 10 percent re-arrest rate. The Corrections Education Association found a 29 percent reduction in re-incarceration rates for those with prison education. Finally, New York’s Bedford Hills Correctional Facility observed a 7.7 recidivism rate for prison college attendees compared to 29.9 percent for those who did not participate (The New Republic, 2002).

**Pedagogical Challenges**

Assuming college education is available to inmates, how does it compare with college education outside prison walls? Several comparisons come to mind. First, are adequate academic resources available to prisoners? The short answer is “No.” Prisoners typically do not have Internet access, have limited computer availability, have limited faculty contact, and prison libraries typically have small holdings of newspapers, journals and other print media. Another essential input to education is study time and space. Inmate
study habits are hard to measure. On one hand, it is reasonable to assume that much time would be available for study. On the other hand, since living quarters are cramped and prison life is highly structured, it is hard to predict if adequate study time and space are available.

Second, is teacher selection and training equal inside and outside prison walls? The first issue is teacher selection. It is no surprise that getting a teacher into a traditional college setting is easier than into a prison. Prison environments are inherently intimidating and tense. Thus, the pool of qualified teachers is smaller compared to traditional classes. Furthermore, there is little special training in prison pedagogy. I doubt any school in the country offers a class in Prison Education even though the correctional setting is quite different. Imagine trying to teach the Prisoners’ Dilemma to group of inmates.

Third, prison classrooms are generally inferior to traditional college classrooms. The primary teaching method in a prison is blackboard-and-chalk, so modern teaching methods like PowerPoint, smart boards and electronic connections are not widely available.

**Changes in Federal Funding Policy**

Support for prison education from the federal government has fallen in the past 15 years. Much of this change was occasioned by the “get tough on crime” sentiment in the early years of the Clinton Administration. The New Republic reported (2002):

Inmates first became eligible for federal education assistance in 1965 under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which allowed all low-income prisoners to apply for college financial aid in the form of Pell Grants. By 1982 hundreds of post-secondary education programs flourished in 45 states. But in 1994, under political pressure to get tough on crime, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which included a provision disqualifying prisoners from receiving Pell Grants. In the
years since, as states have failed to pick up the slack, the majority of higher education prison initiatives across the country have been shut down.

The federal government left it to the states to individually determine the scope of their college education programs. As Table 1 suggests, this formula gives the country a grab bag of approaches. The lack of a common approach coupled with the general aversion to prison issues suggests the downturn in college education in prisons will be long-term.

4. Summary

Prison populations are growing in the United States. This would happen just by virtue of increasing population if the fraction of law breakers were a constant fraction of the people. But prison populations are increasing beyond the overall growth in population. Other reasons may include tougher sentencing and a higher rate of criminal activity, along with the growing population. (Interestingly, the prison population might be also growing due to the generally longer lives of Americans due to improved healthcare).

With increasing prison populations, society must decide what goes on behind the bars. Education seems to be a declining priority. This raises the possibility that prisoners, upon release, exit with lower-than-optimal education levels. These low education levels, along with society’s general reluctance to hire ex-criminals, make employment prospects poor for ex-criminals. This cycle increases the probability that criminals find their way back to prison after release.
References


