Cuts in Prison Education Put Illinois at Risk

Executive Summary

Illinois college-based prison education programs are diminishing, a trend certain to raise correctional costs and foster crime.

For much of the past decade, Illinois has allowed its prison vocational and academic programs to wither away. While the prison population has grown, the opportunity for inmates to learn a skill or earn postsecondary academic certificates has shrunk.

This negative trend is significant. Research shows overwhelmingly that vocational or academic education for people in prison mean they are much less likely to commit new offenses when released. Education protects the public from crime.

Now the pace of neglect is accelerating.

The seemingly endless fiscal crisis in Illinois state government means long delays in payments for community colleges, which are the backbone of vocational and higher education in the Illinois Department of Corrections. Some colleges are terminating classes, ending programs, and, in some cases, simply shutting down their efforts in the prisons.
Community colleges teach inmates how to work in restaurants, manage businesses, or clean offices. Academic programs allow inmates to earn credits towards a college degree. (Teachers employed by the state provide most Adult Basic Education and classes for those seeking GEDs and are not the subject of this report).

There is no question that education helps people who leave prison avoid a return. Recidivism rates for individuals who take vocational or academic classes are as little as one-third that of inmates who study nothing.

When education reduces recidivism, it minimizes the financial and social costs of crime. Education does not cost the public money; it saves money.

The management of the Illinois Department of Corrections supports education in its prisons. But unless state government finds money to finance the community colleges, prison educational programs are certain to continue shrinking, and the public will be the victims.

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Since 1901, JHA has provided public oversight of Illinois’ juvenile and adult correctional facilities. Every year, JHA staff and trained volunteers inspect prisons, jails and detention centers throughout the state. Based on these inspections, JHA regularly issues reports that are instrumental in improving prison conditions.
Cuts in Prison Education Put Illinois at Risk

When inmates are released from prison – and more than 90 percent are – there are compelling financial and security benefits for the public if they are never incarcerated again.

More than half of the people released from Illinois prisons return after committing a new offense. Education greatly reduces the likelihood of this happening, however.

It costs Illinois anywhere from $17,000 to $64,000 a year to incarcerate an inmate, depending largely on the security level of the prison. Altogether, the Illinois Department of Corrections budget is about $1.2 billion.

In comparison, it costs just $9.8 million a year to enroll inmates in community college classes where an inmate can learn to repair electronic equipment, train to be a food service worker, or get a start on a two-year college degree.

What does the public get for its modest investment in the postsecondary education of prisoners?

Education sharply reduces the likelihood that someone will recidivate. A 1997 study published by the Illinois Department of Corrections found that
postsecondary education cut recidivism by two-thirds, from 39 percent to 13 percent. (See figure 1)

Researchers have found similar outcomes in studies across the country. Academic and vocational education reduces recidivism regardless of race, age, nature of offense and length of incarceration. It works as well with women as it does with men. The more education an ex-offender has received in prison, the less likely he or she will again commit a crime.

Research demonstrates that education not only protects the public, it also cuts the cost of incarceration.

The Illinois Correctional Education Contractors Organization issued a comprehensive report on college correctional education in March of this year. The group represents community college prison educators.

The organization estimated that community college educational programs in the prison system annually save Illinois more than $10.4 million in incarceration costs.

More importantly, less recidivism means greater public safety.

It is hard to quantify the exact value of a crime that education prevents. For example, how does one calculate the costs of a burglary that did not happen or a robbery which never occurred?

No one can put a price on public safety, but crime prevention is the most important benefit of prison education programs.
There is another intangible but valuable aspect of prison education. Inmates in school are more cooperative and less likely to commit offenses while incarcerated than are prisoners not in school.

It could be that inmates do not misbehave because they do not want to lose the privilege of education. Or it could be that they are a self-selecting group who by definition are more cooperative than the average inmate. Many states, Illinois included, offer a reduction in sentences as a reward for taking classes and this may act as a disincentive to disruptive behavior.

(In Illinois, there is almost no college education for those convicted of serious crimes such as murder and rape and their sentences are not reduced).

Safety and security are the two paramount goals of any prison. Any reduction of risk to staff and inmates is extremely desirable, even if its dollar value cannot be quantified.

**The Retreat**

In Illinois, the educational opportunities offered inmates by community colleges began declining at least eight years ago. The pace of the decline is now accelerating.

In 2002, nearly 6,000 inmates or 14 percent of the prison population were enrolled in college programs. By 2009, that number had fallen to 4,730 and because of the increase in the prison system’s population, only a little more than 10 percent of inmates were able to take college classes. (See figure 2)

In 2002 there were 136 vocational programs available in Illinois prisons. In 2009 there were only ninety-six.

At first the erosion was small.

Ava Rawlings, Dean of Career and Technical education at Kaskaskia College, has been involved in prison education at the medium security Centralia Correctional Center for decades. She remembers when the college
provided Centralia inmates with many useful skills that could lead to jobs upon their release.

“We used to have auto body (repair) and auto mechanics and welding,” Rawlings aid. “Over the years, the state did not let us (fill teacher) vacancies. The program has decreased gradually by attrition.”

Welding was a particularly useful program, Rawlings said, because it is a skill in demand and ex-offenders could quickly find jobs upon release. The longer an ex-offender must look for work, research shows, the more likely he or she is to recidivate.

Welding is no longer taught in the Illinois prison system, community college educators say.

Meanwhile, a position for a commercial custodian instructor had gone unfilled for years. This loss was similar to other programs that have diminished or disappeared over the years – training for diesel mechanics and emergency medical technicians are examples.

Kaskaskia has suffered from late and erratic payments from the state, as have other community colleges. In April the college decided it would pull out of correctional education. It reversed itself in May and decided to continue its prison program only after the state agreed to fill a needed administrative position.

Other community colleges have not been able to hold on to their correctional education programs.
Spoon River College, which served the Illinois River Correctional Center, is giving up. Unable to fill teaching positions or receive timely payments from the state, Spoon River is leaving what was once a robust program.

“In the past we have had at least 500 students over the course of a year,” said Tom Zaborac, who coordinates prison education for Spoon River. “Now its right about 100.”

Last year Lincoln Trail College, a part of the Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, dropped its educational programs at the Robinson and Lawrence correctional centers.

“I hated to do it,” said Terry Bruce, chief executive of Illinois Eastern. “We granted more degrees than anyone in the state.”

Bruce said he was compelled to cancel Lincoln Trail’s involvement in the prisons because the state was unable to pay for the college’s work. Eventually another community college was able to take over the programs at Robinson and Lawrence.

Many of the community colleges continuing with their prison programs are planning to trim their offerings.

For example, at Illinois Valley Community College, Project Coordinator Peggy Blair said that in 2006 the college taught 1,069 students at Sheridan Correctional Center. This year, she said, the number is 538.

Meanwhile Southeastern Illinois College says it may drop its educational programs at Vienna Correctional Center and the Illinois Youth Center at Harrisburg. Harrisburg is the only facility offering community college classes to minors incarcerated by the state.

The situation of community college education in the prisons is not entirely doubtful. Lake Land College continues to be the largest provider of education, and a spokesman said it will continue its prison work, at least for the next year. Lake Land has recently taken on educational programs at three prisons previously served by other colleges.

But there are barriers for many of the other community colleges that could impede them from ever returning to the prisons.
Space is a precious commodity in most Illinois prisons. Classrooms and labs abandoned by the colleges likely will be taken over by prison management for use as storerooms or other non-educational purposes. It will be difficult to get that space back, educators say.

It would also be difficult to recruit instructors.

Some teachers simply do not want to spend their days working in prison. With salaries as low as $35,000 to $45,000 a year, money is little incentive to take a prison education job. Many teachers say they have received only one or two raises in the past eight years. The layoffs and cutbacks of recent years make for job insecurity that would further complicate recruitment.

**The Politics**

All state agencies are under intense pressure to reduce their budgets. The state is far behind in paying its vendors and Illinois appears in danger of insolvency.

Given Illinois’ fiscal crisis, what kind of political support can one expect for educating convicted criminals, the most stigmatized element of society?

Politically it is always difficult for legislators to support spending on programs that would benefit prison inmates, even if it advantageous for the public. For example, legislators have recently adopted a tough-on-crime stance that has curtailed early release programs. The reason is clear: It is a powerful liability to be perceived as soft on crime.

But officials who deal most closely with inmates support educational programs.

Michael Randle, director of the IDOC, said in an interview that college vocational and academic education programs “are extremely important to us.”
“We know that it is one of the most important factors in successful reentry,” Randle said. “It is part of our agency’s mission.”

But the IDOC has no control over when a college will be paid for its work. Each May the department negotiates contracts with the colleges but it is the responsibility of Illinois Office of the Comptroller to issue the payment. The comptroller will not write a check if there are insufficient funds, which is now often the situation, so community colleges must wait to be paid.

“There are a number of community colleges that are struggling to make payroll because of the late payments they are receiving from the comptroller’s office,” Randle said.

Randle said he is working with the comptroller’s office on a plan to assure that colleges will be paid within sixty days of the time the money is due. This would relieve uncertainty on the part of college management.

Randle also said he does not know if the plan will work.

Michael Monaghan, executive director of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association says it would be unfair to rely on property taxes to solve the problem.

The state has located most prisons in rural communities far from Chicago and its adjacent counties. But it is Chicago and its suburbs which supply about two-thirds of the men and women sent to prison.

Community colleges depend heavily on real estate taxes to support their programs. Monaghan said it is unrealistic to think local residents in southern and central Illinois will pay for educational programs to benefit prison inmates who overwhelmingly come from Chicago and its surrounding counties.

“Most people just do not consider the prison population at the top of their priority list,” Monaghan said. “That is just the way it is.”

Although he strongly supports education in prison, Monaghan has a bleak outlook for the future role of community colleges in educating prison inmates.
“It would be safe to predict that if something does not change, they will all be forced to drop out,” he said.

The John Howard Association would like to thank the Illinois Correctional Education Contractors Organization for its help with this report. Their analysis, “An Overview of College Education Performance in the Illinois Department of Corrections” dated March 26, 2010, is an invaluable aide to those interested in correctional education.

For further information regarding recidivism and education, JHA recommends the following studies provided by the National Institute of Corrections.

[The General Education Development (GED) program, vocational education program, substance abuse treatment programs and sex offender treatment program are all four evaluated. Sections of this report include: scope; background; findings according to education programs, substance abuse treatment, and sex offender treatment; recommendations; agency response; methodology and data; and the appendix "Comparing Recidivism of Inmates Completing Education and Substance Abuse Treatment Programs." http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/pdf/0714rpt.pdf

[The effect of industrial, vocational, and apprenticeship training on employment and recidivism for minorities, as manifest by PREP (Post Release Employment Project) data, is investigated. A Cox proportional hazards model is used to test training impact upon the amount of time for men to be recommitted to the BOP. The research shows that there is a "much larger program effect for minority program participants who are otherwise more likely to be recommitted to prison"
"This report illustrates the overwhelming consensus among public officials that postsecondary education is the most successful and cost-effective method of preventing crime" (p. 3). Sections contained in this report include: executive summary; education and crime; education as crime prevention -- the impact of education on recidivism; Pell Grants and the prison system; and efficiencies -- a cost-benefit analysis.
http://www.bard.edu/bpi/pdfs/crime_report.pdf

The need for providing public funded college education programs in prison is explained. Sections following an executive summary include: introduction; post-secondary correctional education; the multiple benefits of prison-based college education -- reduced recidivism, a safe and manageable prison management, and a cost-effective method of improving public safety; model programs in New York and the United States; summing up; and recommendations. Evidence shows that "college programming in prison is a highly effective tool in reducing recidivism and managing facilities safely" (p. 2).

The positive impact of correctional education in the rehabilitation of offenders is demonstrated. This report is divided into the following parts: introduction; executive summary; key findings; discussion of findings; addressing selection bias; recommendations; and conclusions. Correctional education participants experienced statistically significantly lower recidivism rates than non-participants as measured for re-arrest (48% v. 57%), re-conviction (27% v. 35%), and re-incarceration (21% v. 31%).

The impact of prison-based postsecondary education (PSE) on offenders both within and outside institutions is investigated. Sections following an executive summary include: introduction; PSE in U.S. corrections; selection of research sites; inmate and staff perspectives; results of administrative data analysis; summary of findings; and conclusion. Those individuals who participated in PSE are found to have lower recidivism rates than non-participants. http://www.urban.org/publications/411954.html

Impact of Educational Achievement of Inmates in the Windham School District on Recidivism. Martinez, Alma I.; Eisenberg, Michael
The relationship between educational achievement in prison and recidivism is examined. Sections of this report include: overview of study; recidivism rates; educational achievement and recidivism; vocational certification and recidivism; employment and recidivism; Project RIO and recidivism; and summary. The report finds that "present inmate educational policies have a positive impact on recidivism. However, this impact can be enhanced by allocating more resources to high risk (young property offenders) inmates over longer periods of their incarceration" (p. ii), rather than targeting inmates with the most significant educational deficits. Copyright not indicated.


The types of funding for, and implementation of postsecondary correctional education programs are examined. Chapters following an executive summary include: introduction; prisons and prisoners; the value of postsecondary correctional education; the current status of postsecondary correctional education in the U.S.; funding; barriers to accessing postsecondary correctional education; and conclusions and policy implications.

http://www.inpathways.net/recidivism.pdf


Results from a program evaluation project reporting measures for output (process) and outcome (recidivism) are presented. Sections following an executive summary are: introduction; analytic procedures; specific program data (i.e., sex offender treatment, substance abuse treatment, therapeutic communities, academic and vocational education, pre-release reintegration, work release reintegration, and the faith-based pre-release InnerChange); study limitations; and future program evaluation issues.

http://www.dc.state.ks.us/publications/program-evaluation-reports/ProgramsEvaluationVII.pdf/view


Results are provided from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections’ Education Outcome Study (EOS). Sections in addition to an executive summary are: introduction; study purpose; methodology; results for recidivism and employment outcomes; and conclusion. Appendixes include Informed Consent Form, Pre-Release Education Survey, Institutional/Education Case File Form, and Interview Letters and Forms. Participants have lower re-arrest rates a year following release than do non-participants -- 23.6% versus 29.4% respectively.

This report is required reading for any agency seeking to develop effective education and/or substance abuse programming. Sections of this publication include: introduction; current conditions—the prison population is growing despite decrease in crime; effective correctional programming; education provides opportunities; education impacts recidivism; effective educational program principles; substance abuse programs save tax dollars; effective substance abuse treatment program principles; evidence-based substance abuse treatment practices; cost to benefit; and conclusion. http://www.mtcinstitute.com/publications/StayOutOfPrisonFull2009.pdf

As a precursor to the "Three-State Recidivism Study" being conducted by OCE/CEA, a literature review of articles that examine the relationship between correctional education and recidivism was completed. This paper is the result of the literature review, and includes citation, concise summary, study strengths and weaknesses, and comments for 19 documents. http://www.ed.gov/offices/OV/AE/AdultEd/OCE/19abstracts.html

The status of correctional education programs at the state level is examined. Sections of this update include: report overview; the criminal justice system; funding sources, correctional philosophy, and laws; demographics of the prison population; correctional education instructors; correctional education; benefits of correctional education; state profiles of Maryland, Ohio, and Texas; conclusion; and recommended resources. http://web.archive.org/web/20030319170633/http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/policy/st_correctio n_02.pdf