

Research proposal

The efficacy of juvenile prisons has been a controversial subject, due to the rising incidence of recidivism. In the United States, the recidivism rates among young juvenile offenders are reported to be significantly high, i.e, almost 94% (Lewis et al, 1994). Hagell (2002) found that 88 percent of young British juvenile offenders were prone to recidivism within about two years after their release from custody. The U.S. Department of Education however, found that 83% of the juvenile offenders incarcerated in prisons have reading problems (www.newhopecharitablefoundation.org). It appears that students who are unable to perform well in school feel that they are stupid or inferior and unlikely to succeed in life, which in turn leads them into drugs and a life of crime. As a result, including educational programs in prisons may be beneficial in reducing the recidivism rates by providing offenders the opportunity to improve their chances of getting a job rather than having no other option but to offend again. This research study will examine the benefits of educational programs and poses the research question: *Can improvement in educational programs lead to a reduction in the tendency to take up criminal activity?*

Behrman and Stacey (1997) are of the view that providing training in parenting and following this up with early childhood education, school based supervision of teenagers and getting them involved in educational programs designed to promote community cohesion could be helpful in reducing crime (Behrman and Stacey, 1997:240). This implies that schools can play a significant role in reducing crime by providing education and supervision necessary to prevent young people turning to a life of crime.

Another study that was carried out to examine the association between mental health disorders and offending identified four key groups of young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties as being at risk for offending. The study found that recidivism is more prevalent among young offenders with mental health problems, with young people from ethnic minorities being over represented. Since crime tends to be centred in low income,

minority group neighbourhoods, this further suggests that educational programs could help to address the causes of crime such as poverty, by providing a means to less affluent members of society to be able to find a means to improve their lot and their chances of succeeding in later life. (Behrman and Stacey, 1997:240).

In a study of young prison inmates, the findings suggested that criminal behaviour in juveniles could be deterred by offering solutions such as better educational opportunities through smaller classes and more individual teacher attention, sports programs, training for jobs and greater involvement by churches (De la Torre, 1997). For example, in the U.K., adolescents are being offered the opportunity to train as apprentices, in order to better prepare them and equip them with the necessary job skills to function within a competitive environment.

In yet another study that was carried out by Dr. Stan Kaseno at the San Bernardino juvenile hall, the findings showed that 70 to 75% of the inmates who had problems in visual processing (www.newhopecharitablefoundation.org). Most of these inmates also demonstrated recidivism and were not in prison for the first time. Dr. Kaseno found however, that when these inmates were given educational vision development exercises to correct the problems of convergence, tracking and similar problems, the rates of recidivism of such prisoners dropped to below 16%. This provides a strong indication that the vision processing problems could well have contributed to the feelings of inferiority of the inmates, leading to low self esteem. This also places such young people experiencing feelings of low self worth at risk of dropping out of school or taking to drugs and similar activities, all of which can contribute to criminal activity and recidivism.

The Long Beach community has commenced the Safe and Smart After School program in order to provide after school education programs to students and reduce crime. (www.safeandsmart.org). In this way, the high risk atmosphere after school is addressed by providing a safe environment for students to improve their education rather

than resorting to crime. Promotional materials for this program have stated that research indicates that after school programs deliver \$3 in benefit for every \$1 that is invested. Such community based educational programs and the success they are enjoying in contributing to reduction in crime levels by safely engaging students in after school activities also reinforces the potential benefits that could accrue from educational programs.

On the basis of the findings above, it is proposed to carry out this research study through a comparative survey carried out among juvenile offenders at two separate prisons, i.e, one where prisoners are being provided educational programs and one where they are not. The recidivism trends from both prisons will also be examined by interviewing former inmates from both prisons in order to determine where the outcomes have been more progressive in terms of former inmates securing jobs and becoming productive members of society. The survey will include questions that would seek to determine the perceptions of the offenders themselves about whether or not educational prison programs would have helped them to choose not to offend.

This study is likely to demonstrate that improving educational programs and especially providing educational programs in prison would be beneficial in reducing recidivism and criminal activity. Since recidivism results from the low self worth of offenders who are unable to cope in school, aiding the process of helping these individuals to acquire an education and be better prepared from a vocational standpoint is likely to contribute to reducing recidivism.

References:

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