



Programs to aid ex-offenders: we don't know 'nothing works'

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In his article, "Helping ex-offenders enter the labor market," Frederick Englander surveys some of the recent research on how employment programs affect the behavior of offenders and former offenders.¹ He concludes that the available evidence on the effectiveness of the various programs indicates that nothing works when it comes to rehabilitation. Englander suggests that it may be time to shift resources from programs for offenders and ex-offenders to education and training of young people with limited access to those services.

We believe that Englander's conclusions are premature. Our own reading of the literature and work with a number of employment programs support different conclusions: (1) we don't know what does work and (2) available research does not suggest abandoning employment programs for prisoners or parolees but rather initiating different types of programs that will build on what has been learned over the past 12 years.

Nothing works?

The rehabilitation literature has been evaluated extensively.² Most researchers, like Englander, find that only a few methodologically sound studies indicate that any single rehabilitative program significantly alters the behavior of large segments of the offender population. There are, however, marked differences in the conclusions that are drawn from this finding. Douglas Lipton, Robert Martinson, and Judith Wilks, like Englander, conclude that nothing works.³ However, James Wilson states: "The conclusion that Martinson was right does not mean that he or anyone else has

proved that 'nothing works,' only that nobody has proved that something works."⁴

Our response to Englander's findings is similar to Wilson's reaction to Martinson's. Although Englander has been careful in reporting the results of the major evaluations of employment programs conducted during the last 10 years, his conclusion that nothing works is not merited.

In his assessment of the rehabilitation literature, Englander concentrated on the methodology used in each of the studies surveyed and also on the significance of behavioral differences. While these aspects are extremely important to any program evaluation, other things also need to be considered. We suggest that the strength and the degree of program implementation must be considered before concluding that "nothing works."

Some of the programs surveyed by Englander consisted of only very weak interventions. Consider a few examples. Work-release programs generally place inmates in very low-level jobs for relatively short periods of time.⁵ The transitional aid programs consisted of providing financial assistance to newly released ex-offenders for up to 6 months. Most prison programs provide little or no training and often what is provided is not relevant to today's labor market (for example, making mailbags or license plates). In evaluating the effects of correctional programs, it is necessary to consider the strength of the treatment along with expected results. For many of the programs considered by Englander, insignificant effects on behavior should have been expected.

Even a "strong" intervention will not be effective if it is not implemented. In assessing the strength of the program being evaluated, it is necessary to obtain detailed information on how the program was conducted. It is rare, indeed, that a program is implemented precisely as planned. Englander should have considered the degree of program execution, as well as the merits of the methodology used in evaluating it.

Englander appears to believe that only the results of random experiments should be considered valid. While sympathetic to this position, we realize that there are often

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reasons to question the results of random experiments and to applaud carefully conducted quasi-experiments. For example, Gordon Waldo and T. G. Chiricos' study of work release used an experimental design that had a comparatively large sample size (281 individuals). Even so, given the reasonably small effects on recidivism that could be expected to accompany a short (2-to-6 month) timespan on work release (placement in low-skill jobs), the probability that they incorrectly concluded that work release had no significant effect on recidivism (measured by post-release arrest) was approximately 60 percent.⁶ Conversely, the good quasi-experiments when carefully compared and contrasted can provide valuable insight and should not be dismissed as providing no information.⁷

Programs for offenders?

Abolishing employment programs for offenders will not decrease the prison population but could increase the cost of running the prison systems.⁸ Employment and other rehabilitative programs currently carried out in the prison systems serve a number of functions: (1) lowering the costs of running the prison system; (2) facilitating prison management; (3) attracting suitable personnel; and (4) improving the post-release behavior of participants. These goals often conflict. For example, a work-release program which places a large number of prison inmates in low-skilled jobs may be effective in lowering prison costs but may have little or no effect on post-release behavior. Perhaps we should honestly admit that the major goal of most prison "rehabilitation programs" has not been rehabilitation. These programs should be continued if they meet other goals but they should not be expected to rehabilitate inmates.

Promising research directions

Although the existing literature does not suggest that there is a single employment program that "will work" for large segments of our prison population, various studies suggest that some strategies are workable for certain types of offenders. Transitional aid and programs which provide work in supportive environments have met with limited success.⁹ This literature provides a basis on which to build more successful rehabilitative programs within our prison systems. However, it does not yet provide any basis for diverting large amounts of resources into another untested "rehabilitative" program.

Instead, we believe that limited resources should be provided to develop, implement, and evaluate programs that have as their primary purpose the rehabilitation of offenders. We believe that employment programs will be best developed through the coordinated efforts of social scientists, employment professionals, and correctional officials.¹⁰

Some social scientists' models of human behavior indicate programs which may be effective for certain types of offenders. For example, an economic model of crime sug-

gests that *economically motivated* offenders may reduce their criminal activity if they are provided with *desirable* legitimate means of *satisfying* their economic needs.¹¹ Specifically, the model suggests that participants who find and keep "good jobs" are less likely to commit crimes than those who cannot find suitable work. The model implies that we select a subset of offenders who relied on illegal means to fulfill their economic needs.¹² It also suggests that the program must be of sufficient duration and thoroughness so that participants are able to find and keep "good" jobs.

Manpower programs for offenders are founded on the following model.



This model has not been fully tested because it is often implicitly rather than explicitly stated. We do not know if the programs surveyed by Englander "failed" because labor market performance was not improved or because it did not affect criminal activity, or both. It is important from both a programmatic and theoretical perspective to know whether the causal relationships hold and, if so, to what extent. Available literature indicates that certain types of programs (for example, on-the-job training) result in greater improvements in labor market performance than others. Further, the existing criminological literature suggests that job satisfaction may have a stronger effect on recidivism than increased wages.

With social science theory providing only general guidance for program development, the participation of employment professionals in program development becomes extremely important. These professionals are familiar with the labor markets to which ex-offenders may return and they have the ability to develop and administer programs that will allow former inmates to successfully participate in these markets.

Correctional officials have expertise in dealing with offenders who are often unstable and have many needs. In some cases, there may be a need for counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, as well as vocational training.

Once developed, the employment program must be carefully implemented. Implementation is a serious problem in many employment programs. In recent years, researchers have considered implementation issues and have come up with various methods for documenting program implementation.¹³

Following implementation, the effects of the program on the behavior of ex-offenders must be assessed. Evaluation of the impact of the program should be carefully planned at the same time that the program is developed. The evaluation should involve random assignment, a sample size sufficient to assure the detection of small effects, and measurement of the post-release labor market performance as

well as criminal activity.¹⁴ An indepth study considering theory, institutions, effectiveness of interventions, and requirements of evaluation research would assist in resolving some of the questions concerning offender rehabilitation. We believe it is too early to abandon employment programs for offenders.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS take on important roles in our prison systems including (1) cost reduction; (2) ensuring that inmates are occupied, thereby assisting in prison management; and (3) the rehabilitation of offenders. Each role needs to be considered when assessing the effectiveness of employment programs for offenders.

To date, we believe that only a few prison employment programs hold the rehabilitation of offenders as their major objective. But if rehabilitation is to be a primary goal for at least some of the prison employment programs, current literature provides guidance for the development of more successful programs. Most importantly, perhaps, we should learn from the literature that weak interventions, which do not consider the need to accommodate different types of offenders, have little chance of working. Before eliminating offender employment programs, their effectiveness should be given a full and careful trial. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ See *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1983, pp. 25–30.

² For example, see Douglas Lipton, Robert Martinson, and Judith Wilks, *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment: A Survey of Treatment Evaluation Studies* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1975); Lee Sechrest, Susan O. White, Elizabeth D. Brown, eds., *The Rehabilitation of Criminal Offenders: Problems and Prospects* (Washington, National Academy of Sciences, 1979); and Paul Gendreau and Robert K. Ross, *Correctional Potency: Treatment and Deterrence on Trial* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services) and the references cited within.

³ Lipton and others, *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment*.

⁴ James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1983), p. 167.

⁵ Ann D. Witte, *Work Release in North Carolina: The Program and the Progress* (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina, Institute of Government, 1973).

⁶ This is, of course, the probability of type II error. See Jacob Cohen, *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (New York, Academic Press, 1977) for the tables from which we obtained our estimate of the probability of type II error for the study by G. P. Waldo and T. G. Chiricos, "Work Release and Recidivism: An Empirical Evaluation of a Social Policy," *Evaluation Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1977, pp. 87–108. Specifically, we examined the power of a X^2 test at $\alpha = .05$, sample size = 281, effect size = .10 (which we believe to be reasonable for the 2- to 6-month work-release experience of this sample group). The power for these values of the tests was less than .40 (see p. 235), indicating a probability of type II error of approximately 60 percent.

Two aspects of Englander's assessment of work-release programs are also worthy of brief note. First, Englander bases his overall evaluation of the effect of work release largely on the conclusions of a survey by Jonathan Katz and Scott Decker, "An Analysis of Work Release," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, June 1982, pp. 229–59. Unfortunately, this survey is not as carefully done as Englander's. Second, in interpreting our research related to the post-release effects of work release in North Carolina, Englander does not appear to appreciate the reasons for the different types of research. We conducted a quasi-experimental evaluation of the North Carolina work-release program (Ann D. Witte, "Work Release in North Car-

olina—A Program that Works!" *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Winter 1977, pp. 230–37), which involved selection of a comparison and control group and control via multivariate statistical techniques for a wide range of factors affecting the post-release behavior of offenders. We concluded that work release had no significant effect on the recidivism rate but did reduce the severity of recidivist offenses. Subsequent to this evaluation, we used the same data set to explore the nature of labor markets for prison releases. See Ann D. Witte and Pamela Reid, "An Exploration of the Determinants of Labor Market Performance of Prison Releases," *Journal of Urban Economics*, August 1980, pp. 313–29. As we only have detailed labor market data for a subset of individuals involved in the work-release evaluation, the study involves a different population than did the work-release evaluation. Further, as the purpose of this research was exploratory, we made no use of quasi-experimental design. We do not believe that this research tells us anything definitive about the effect of work release on post-release labor market performance, although we do believe that it provides some useful insights concerning the nature of labor markets for ex-offenders.

Englander also cites research which used an entirely different data set. See Peter Schmidt and Ann D. Witte, "Evaluating Correctional Programs: Models of Criminal Recidivism and an Illustration of Their Use," *Evaluation Review*, October 1980, pp. 585–600. The purpose of this research was to provide the North Carolina Department of Corrections with models that could predict recidivism. The Department wished to use these models to predict future prison population and to evaluate correctional programs. The work encompassed no quasi-experimental design and, therefore, should not be considered to provide useful insights concerning the effect of work release on post-release behavior.

⁷ See Frank Zimring, "Policy Experiments in General Deterrence: 1970–1975," in Alfred Blumstein, Jacquelin Cohen, Daniel Nagin, eds., *Deterrence and Incapacitation: Estimating the Effects of Criminal Sanctions on Crime Rates* (Washington, National Academy of Sciences, 1978); and Philip J. Cook, "Research in Criminal Deterrence: Laying the Groundwork for the Second Decade," in Norval Morris and Michael Tonry, eds., *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1980), pp. 211–68.

⁸ Sechrest and others, eds., *Rehabilitation*.

⁹ See Peter H. Rossi, Richard A. Berk, Kenneth J. Lenihan, *Money, Work and Crime: Experimental Evidence* (New York, Academic Press, 1980), and Board of Directors, Manpower Development Research Corp., *Summary and Findings of the National Supported Work Demonstration* (Cambridge, MA, Ballinger Publishing Co., 1980).

¹⁰ We are currently involved in such an effort. See Pamela K. Lattimore and Ann D. Witte, *Research Services in Support of the Sandhills Evaluation Project, Phase I: Criteria, Randomization, and Data* (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina, Department of Economics, 1983).

¹¹ For a survey of economic models of crime, see Peter Schmidt and Ann D. Witte, *An Economic Analysis of Crime and Justice* (New York, Academic Press, 1984), pt. II.

¹² In our current project, the criteria for inclusion in the study population are: conviction for an income-producing offense, 18- to 21-year-olds, no serious drug problems, no physical disabilities, normal intelligence, and a minimum of 8 months remaining to be served before release (to assure a minimum of 6 months in the program). These criteria are not as stringent as would be desirable but were chosen to ensure some control over the type of inmate entering the program and to provide a sufficient sample size to allow us to discern positive program effects, if present.

¹³ Ronald G. Tharp and Ronald Gallimore, "The Ecology of Program Research and Development: A Model of Evaluation Succession," in Lee Sechrest and others, eds., *Evaluation Studies Review Annual*, Vol. 4 (Beverly Hills, CA, Sage Publications, 1979). See also Gary D. Gottfredson, ed., *The School Action Effectiveness Study: First Interim Report* (Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, 1982).

¹⁴ The legal and moral problems surrounding random assignment often have been overstated although they certainly must be considered. See Eva Lantos Rezmovic, "Methodological Considerations in Evaluating Correctional Effectiveness: Issues and Chronic Problems," in Sechrest and others, *Rehabilitation*, p. 165. Also see Robert E. Boruch and Joe S. Cecil, *Solutions to Ethical and Legal Problems in Social Research* (New York, Academic Press, 1983).