

## **The effect of Earning a GED on Recidivism Rates**

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### Abstract

This study presents data comparing recidivism rates of inmates who earned their GED (General Equivalency Diploma) while incarcerated in the New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) with inmates who were released from the Department with no degree. Previous research has suggested that correctional education has a positive effect on recidivism rates of offenders. This study compares the recidivism rate of inmates who earned a GED while incarcerated with two other groups: 1) inmates who already had a high school diploma or GED upon their admission to the Department, and 2) inmates who failed to earn a GED while incarcerated. Additionally, this comparison is made for inmates who were under age 21 at the time of their release and for those who were 21 or older at the time of their release. The findings indicate that those inmates who earned a GED while incarcerated returned to custody within three years at a significantly lower rate than offenders who did not earn a GED while incarcerated. The relationship between GED attainment and return-to-custody is particularly strong among offenders who were under age 21 at release. C

### Introduction

"The more assorted tools that we're able to provide our inmates before they are released from our custody, the greater their chances of becoming successful, law-abiding and productive members of society." Frank Headley, Deputy Commissioner, NYSDOCS (DOCS Today, April 2002, p. 10) This study was designed to address the question: "Does earning a High School Equivalency Diploma while incarcerated in DOCS reduce an offender's likelihood of returning to the Department's custody following release?" In particular, the Division of Program Services was interested in determining whether earning a GED while in DOCS had a different impact on offenders under age 21 at release compared with offenders age 21 and over. The present study examines the return-to-custody rates of a sample of offenders who earned a high school equivalency diploma while incarcerated in DOCS and two comparison groups of offenders who did not. The findings are presented for all offenders as well as separately for offenders under age 21 and offenders age 21 and older at the time of

release.

## Background

The Department's academic education program focuses on providing inmates with the attitudes, knowledge, skills and credentials needed to function as contributing adults, both while incarcerated and when released back into the community. The two primary goals for the education program are to ensure that every inmate who has the capability and leaves the system possesses a high school diploma or equivalency, and has the skills needed to obtain employment when released from custody. In order to accomplish these goals, the Department mandates education for all inmates until they reach the ninth grade level' in reading and math. Additionally, inmates are encouraged to prepare for the Test of General Education Development (GED) which leads to a high school equivalency diploma.

The Department provides a range of academic education programs for inmates who do not possess a high school diploma, through day and evening classes as well as outreach programs. Programs provided by the Department include: Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in English and Spanish, which focus on reading, writing, and math for inmates who function below the fifth grade level; Pre-GED classes in English and Spanish, which focus on reading, writing, and math for inmates who function between the fifth and ninth grade levels; GED classes in English and Spanish that prepare inmates who function at or above the ninth grade level for the GED examination; and Bilingual programs which provide ABE and GED instruction in Spanish as well as English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) for inmates with limited English proficiency.

Initial program placement is based on the standardized achievement tests administered during the reception/ classification process. Subsequent tests are administered approximately every four months to inmates participating in academic programs to measure progress and determine eligibility for placement in more advanced level classes. The official screening test, similar in both form and content to the GED, is usually administered to determine inmate readiness for the actual GED test. The screening procedure enhances the individual's chance of passing the GED by providing a realistic testing experience and serves as a predictor of success that in turn maximizes the Department's resources.

The Tests of General Education Development (GED) are developed by the American Council on Education to assess skills, concepts and application

of knowledge generally associated with each of the major content areas at the high school level. Policies and conditions under which certificates may be issued and regulations for administering the GED test are set by the New York State Department of Education. Candidates who meet the requirements receive a high school equivalency diploma, which is commonly accepted as a credential where a high school diploma is required.

## Review of the Literature

Several recent studies have shown that inmates who participate in an education program (e.g. literacy, ABE, GED, college) while incarcerated are less likely to return to prison after their release than offenders who do not participate in an education program (Boe, 1998; Burke & Vivian, 2001; Harer, 1995; Haulard, 2001; Porporino & Robinson, 1992; Ryan, 1991).

"According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, there is an inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education. The more education received, the less likely an individual is to be re-arrested or re-imprisoned" (Open Society Institute, 1997, p.4). Porporino and Robinson (1992) found that offenders in the Canadian federal correctional system who completed the ABE program were less likely to return to prison after release than both those who participated in but did not complete the program and those who dropped out of the program.

Burke and Vivian (2001) found that inmates at a county correctional facility in Massachusetts who participated in a college program while incarcerated were less likely to return to the facility within five years than a comparable group of offenders that did not participate in the program. However, this study had a very limited definition of recidivism. An offender had to be re-sentenced to the same county correctional facility in order to be counted as a recidivist. Offenders sentenced to state prison or to another county jail within five years of their release from the study facility were not counted as recidivists. Although the New York State Department of Correctional Services (NYSDOCS) has a similar limitation, in that recidivism is defined as a return to state prison only, it is not as limiting as Burke & Vivian's (2001) definition, since there are 70 facilities under the Department's jurisdiction.

In his study of recidivism among Federal prisoners, Harer (1995) concluded that: the more years of education inmates had completed at their admission to prison, the less likely they were to recidivate, and recidivism rates were inversely related to educational program

participation while incarcerated. Haulard (2001) identified and reviewed several inmate education programs that were successful in reducing recidivism.

A 1986 study by the NYSDOCS found that the return rate of a sample of offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated was substantially lower (17.1%) than the Department's overall return-to-custody rate (26.3%) (Macdonald & Bala, 1986).

In July 1989, the Department produced a report that improved upon the 1986 study by expanding the scope and the sample size of the study and included results from a more comparable control group (NYSDOCS, 1989). The 1986 study included only 14 facilities, while the 1989 study included all facilities. The 1986 study tracked a sample of 205 offenders while the 1989 study tracked 4,226 offenders. Finally, the 1986 study compared the return-to-custody rate of the sample of offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated to the overall Department return-to-custody rate. In contrast, the 1989 study compared the return rate of offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated to the return rate of offenders who were admitted to DOCS without a high school degree and who did not earn a GED while in DOCS. Offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated returned at a much lower rate (34.0%) than those offenders who did not (39.1%) (NYSDOCS, 1989). This difference was found to be statistically significant.

Overall, previous research studies have found that educational progress while incarcerated serves to reduce the likelihood of re-incarceration. This study expands on earlier research by the Department on the effect of earning a GED on return-to-custody rates.

## Methods

**Selection of Sample.** All inmates released for the first time in 1996 from DOCS due to parole release, conditional release, or maximum expiration of sentence were selected for inclusion in the study. This is the most recent cohort of releases that meet the Department standard of at least 36 months of exposure in the community. Inmates released in 1996 were broken into three groups based on their educational background: 1) earned a GED in DOCS, 2) admitted to and released from DOCS with no degree, and 3) admitted to DOCS with a degree (see Table 1).

**Follow-Up Procedure.** In accordance with the Department's established recidivism research procedures (Kellam, 2001), all inmates were followed

for 36 months after their release from custody. The Department's computer files were utilized to determine the number of sampled cases who were returned to DOCS' custody within 36 months following their release. The type of return to DOCS was also examined to determine whether an inmate initially returned as a New Court Commitment (for committing a new crime) or as a Parole Violator (for a technical parole violation).

## Results

**Overall Findings.** The attainment of a GED had a positive impact on recidivism rates, as measured by return to custody. As shown in Table 2 (next page), 32% of offenders who earned their GED while in DOCS' custody were returned to state prison within 36 months after release. Among inmates who did not earn their GED at DOCS, 37% were returned to state prison. The return rate of inmates that earned a GED at DOCS was similar to the 32% return rate of inmates who had a GED or high school diploma prior to commitment to DOCS.

**Findings Among Young Offenders.** With respect to young offenders (inmates under age 21 at release), the impact of earning a GED on recidivism rates was even more substantial. Table 3A shows that 40% of young offenders who earned their GED while in custody returned to custody within 36 months compared with 54% of young inmates who did not earn their GED at DOCS. The return rate of inmates who earned a GED at DOCS (40%) was slightly lower than the 43% return rate of young inmates who had a degree when admitted.

**Findings Among Offenders Age 21 or Older.** With respect to older offenders (inmates age 21 or older at release), Table 3B (see next page) shows that 30% of older offenders who earned their GED while in custody returned to custody within 36 months compared with 35% of older inmates who did not earn their GED at DOCS. The return rate of inmates who earned a GED at DOCS (30%) was slightly lower than the 32% return rate of older inmates who had a degree when admitted.

**Statistically Significant Difference Between Inmates Who Earned GED and Inmates Who Did Not Earn GED.** In addition to observing the raw difference in the actual return-to-custody rates of the inmates who earned a GED and those who did not, a chi square test was utilized to determine if this difference was statistically significant. It was found that the difference in return rates between inmates who earned a GED while incarcerated at DOCS and those with no degree was statistically significant

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Type of Return: New Commitment vs. Parole Violator. Inmates can be returned to custody for different reasons. Inmates that commit a new crime after release are returned as New Commitments, with a new sentence. Inmates released on parole can be returned to custody as Parole Violators if they violate the conditions of their parole. Among all offenders who returned to custody within 36 months, those who earned a GED at DOCS initially returned to custody for a new crime at a lower rate (34%) than inmates with no degree (41 %) and those admitted with a degree (38%) (see Table 4).

Among young offenders, those who earned a GED at DOCS returned to Department custody as New Commitments at a much lower percentage (33%) than inmates with no degree (46%). However, they returned as New Commitments at a similar rate as those admitted with a degree (31 %) (see Table 5).

## Conclusion

The major finding of this study can be summarized by the following statements and Figure 1 (next page):

Among inmates first released from DOCS' custody in 1996 due to parole release, conditional release, or maximum expiration of sentence, those who earned a GED while incarcerated returned to custody after a three-year exposure period at a significantly lower rate (32%) than offenders who did not earn a GED while incarcerated (37%). The relationship between GED attainment and return-to-custody is stronger among offenders who were under age 21 at release (40% return rate for GED recipients; 54% return rate among those with no GED) than among inmates who were age 21 or older at release (30% return rate for GED recipients; 35% return rate among those with no GED).

In considering this finding, it may be argued that those inmates who successfully earned a GED were more motivated or competent than those who did not participate in or complete a GED program and that this factor is related to their future success on parole. These individuals might be expected to do well on parole as a result of their motivation and not just achievement of a GED. However, this research was designed to analyze the relationship of GED attainment and recidivism without attempting to attribute any observed differences completely to the impact of the GED program. The lower return rate of the sample of offenders who earned a

GED may be jointly attributed to the offenders' motivation, capabilities, participation in other programs, as well as to participation in the GED program. The possibility of self-- selection bias need not lead to the conclusion that providing GED programs to motivated offenders is unnecessary or uneconomical. On the contrary, it may be argued that it is appropriate correctional policy to offer such individuals opportunities to maximize their potential for successful reintegration into the community.

The significantly lower return rates of offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated compared to those who did not confirms the positive relationship between these two factors found in previous studies conducted by the Department. In fact, the current study produced a difference in return rates that is very similar to that observed in the 1989 study conducted by the Department. In the 1989 study, it was found that inmates who had earned a GED while at DOCS returned to custody at a rate of 34% compared to a rate of 39% among inmates who did not earn a GED while at DOCS. In the present study, 32% of inmates who earned a GED returned to custody within 36 months compared with 37% of inmates who did not earn a GED. The fact that both of these studies, which were based on large sample sizes and substantial follow-up periods, arrived at a similar conclusion further validates this finding.

The finding in this study that the relationship between earning a GED and rate of return-to-custody is especially strong for young offenders validates the importance of the Department's emphasis on preparing inmates under the age of 21 to pass the GED exam. The finding of statistical significance, the substantial follow-up period involved (36 months), and the large sample of offenders used add further confidence to the study conclusions. This study clearly indicates that those offenders who earned a GED while incarcerated were less likely to return to state prison than a comparable sample of offenders who did not earn a GED.

#### Footnotes

1. Education for inmates became mandated until they reach the 9th grade level on May 1, 2001. Previously, inmates were mandated to be in education only until they reached the 8th grade level (Department Directive #4804, October 1994).
2. Inmates under the age of 21 are mandated by Department Directive (#4804, October 1994) to be enrolled in an academic education program until the attainment of a GED.

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