

Prison-based education declined during economic downturn, study finds

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State-level spending on prison education programs declined sharply during the economic downturn, with the sharpest drop occurring in states that incarcerate the most prisoners, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

Large states cut spending by an average of 10 percent between the 2009 and 2012 fiscal years, while medium-sized states cut spending by 20 percent, according to the study.

"There has been a dramatic contraction of the prison education system, particularly those programs focused on academic instruction versus vocational training," said Lois Davis, the study's lead author and a senior policy researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "There are now fewer teachers, fewer course offerings and fewer students enrolled in academic education programs."

While the drop appears to have resulted from budget cuts prompted by the [economic downturn](#), Davis said evidence suggests that the curtailment of prison education could increase prison system costs in the longer term.

"We need to weigh the short-term need to reduce budgets with the long-term consequence of trimming programs that help keep people from returning to prison after they have paid their debt to society," Davis said.

The findings are from the capstone report of a project sponsored by the

U.S. Department of Justice to assess the effectiveness of correctional education programs and help chart a path forward to improve understanding of both academic and vocational education for inmates.

There long has been debate about the role prison-based education programs can play in preparing inmates to return to society and keeping them from returning to prison. Recidivism remains high nationally, with four in 10 inmates returning to prison within three years of release.

The RAND study included a comprehensive review of the scientific literature about correctional education programs for adults and a meta-analysis to synthesize findings from multiple studies about the effectiveness of correctional education programs.

Released in 2013, the meta-analysis found, on average, inmates who participated in correctional education programs had a 13 percentage point reduction in their probability of returning to prison. Researchers also found that prison education programs are cost effective, with a \$1 investment reducing incarceration costs by \$5 during the first three years post-release.

In the latest report, researchers detail findings from a survey of state correctional education directors about how funding changed after the recession struck in 2008.

Overall spending on prison education nationally fell on average by 6 percent from 2009 to 2012, but that masked much larger drops in the states with the largest prison populations. Vocational programs fared better, but there were still significant cuts in large and medium-sized states.

State correctional education directors expressed concern that a new general education development (GED) exam that begins this year will

make it harder for inmates to earn their high school equivalent diplomas.

The new exam is more rigorous and relies on computer-based testing—a profound change for states' correctional [education programs](#) that often have limited computer resources. Of the 31 states that plan to implement the 2014 GED exam, 14 expect the more-rigorous approach will drive down participation and 16 states expect fewer inmates to complete the exam.

Researchers say that for corrections officials to make better decisions about how to spend limited funding, new information is needed to understand what dosage and models of instruction are associated with better results.

"We know prison education works, but we don't know which instructional models provide the best results or how much instruction and training inmates need to be successful," said Robert Bozick, a report co-author and a social scientist at RAND. "Answering these questions will help correctional leaders to direct limited resources in a way that provides the most benefits."

Future research at the federal and state levels should evaluate different educational instructional models, innovative strategies to implement information technology in the classroom and instructional quality in correctional education settings, Bozick said.

More information: The study, "How Effective Is Correctional Education and Where Do We Go from Here?" is available at www.rand.org.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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