

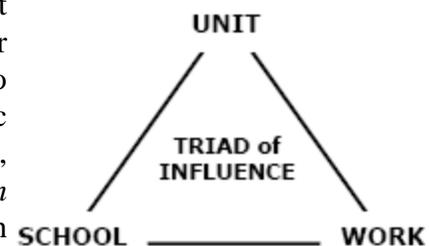
Vermont's Workforce Development Program

Program Evaluation: Offender-Specific Goals

Previous correctional research has identified employment and education as important risk factors within the offender population (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Gillis et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2006; Steurer & Smith, 2003). Motiuk (1996) found that offenders with a history of unstable employment were significantly more likely to re-offend than were offenders with a history of constant employment. Similarly, in a study conducted by Saylor and Gaes (1997), male offenders who had participated in institutional employment were 24 percent less likely to recidivate than non-participants during a follow-up period of eight to twelve years post-release. In addition, several studies have demonstrated at least moderate evidence for a link between employment needs and recidivism among women offenders (Blanchette, 1996; Delveaux et al., 2005; Dowden et al., 2001). Overall, however, results from studies examining correctional employment programs and release performance have been equivocal, with some showing no demonstrable effects (Bouffard et al., 2000).

In a meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation and work programs for adult offenders, Wilson et al. (2000) found a “reduction in re-offending greater for educational programs than for work programs.” (p. 361). Even so, as with research on correctional work programs, the results are mixed. Piehl (1995) found that 41% of inmates who did not participate in correctional education returned to prison compared to 33% who did participate. Harer (1995) found significant differences in re-incarceration rates between education participants (39%) and non-participants (46%). However, several studies had non-significant findings. For example, an earlier study by Harer (1994) did not find lower recidivism rates for education participants (29%) versus non-participants (33%). Likewise, Adams et al. (1994) found that correctional education participants had a re-incarceration rate of 23% compared to non-participants who had a re-incarceration rate of 24%.

A major deficit in previous correctional programs is the isolation of employment and education as individual factors targeted for intervention. In the fall of 2003, the Community High School of Vermont (CHSVT) within the Vermont Department of Corrections was awarded a three-year federal research/demonstration grant from the U.S. Department of Education, designed to target offenders who have the greatest need – those with the highest risk to re-offend and who have poor work histories. The Workforce Development Program sought to teach offenders fundamental life skills using a unique, holistic approach that immersed program participants in educational, work and living unit settings that use a *strength-based approach* that supports offender development. This strength-based approach is built on the understanding and integration/utilization of 16 aspects of behavioral intelligence, or life skills, that increase ones ability to problem solve effectively, called *Habits of Mind* (HOM). These *Habits of Mind* are detailed in a series of four books by Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick (2000). The holistic approach combined the efforts of trained correctional facility living unit staff, CHSVT faculty, and Vermont

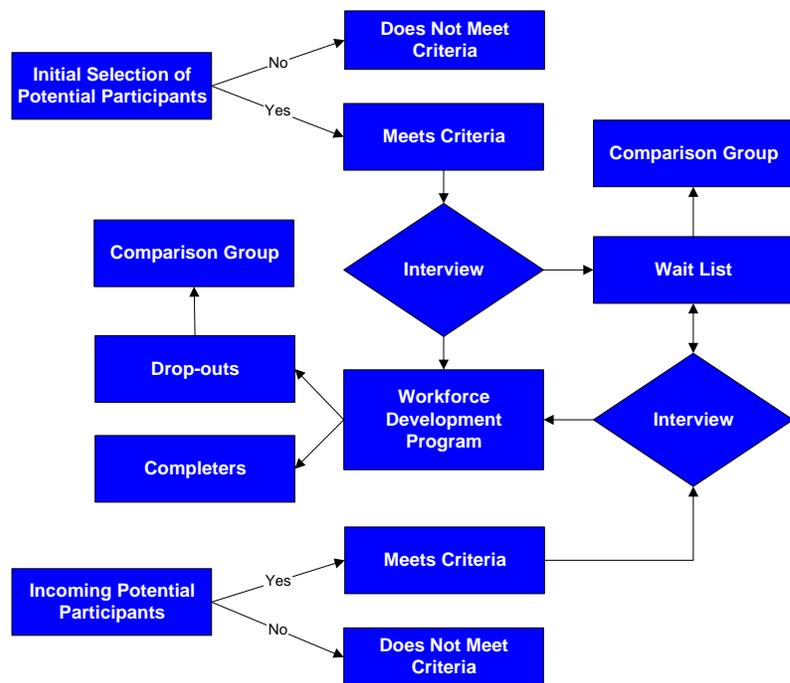


Offender Work Programs (VOWP) instructors; teaching and supporting the assimilation and utilization of these 16 *Habits of Mind* by offenders in their living units, school settings and at work.

Three major offender-specific goals of the Workforce Development Program were:

1. Acquisition of the *Habits of Mind*;
2. 90% employment rate within one month of release; and
3. 25% reduction in recidivism.

Potential participants in the Program were identified through a search of the Department of Corrections' automated database used to compile and maintain offender records. The database includes offender information ranging from demographics to institutional conduct and intake risk and needs assessment. Although the database is maintained mostly for administrative purposes, the database allows for the extraction of essential information for conducting research. For males, the criteria for inclusion was a Level of Service Inventory - Revised (LSI-R) score greater than 23 and 12-22 months left to serve to their (projected) minimum release date. Once an offender was found eligible, he entered the Program eligibility pool. The offender was given a full explanation of Program participation rules and requirements, as well as a description of the benefits to program participation. If he appeared to be genuinely interested, he was invited to participate in the Program and asked to sign the Program Agreement. Arrangements were then made to have him transferred to the Program Living Unit at either Northern State Correctional Facility (NSCF) or Northwest State Correctional Facility (NWSCF).



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The original concept was to randomly select male offenders into the Program. Unfortunately, there were too few inmates who met the criteria to both fill Program beds and provide for a control group. Therefore, a quasi-experimental design was used by creating a comparison group including offenders who: (1) met criteria but were not interviewed for inclusion into the Program; (2) met criteria but declined to participate in the Program; and (3) offenders who initially entered the Program but withdrew within two months.

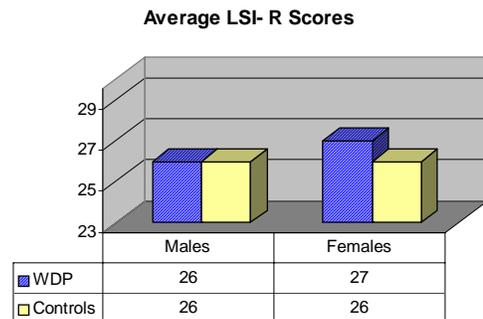
For females, the criteria for inclusion was at least three months to serve and an agreement to enroll in the HOM course as offered by CHSVT and be employed in designated VOWP or facility jobs.

Participation in the research project may take any one of four forms:

1. Completion of the HOM course participation in a weekly HOM reinforcement group and work (either at VOWP or in a facility job).
2. Completion of the HOM course and participation in a weekly HOM reinforcement group but not work.
3. Work but not take the HOM course.
4. Neither work nor take the HOM course.

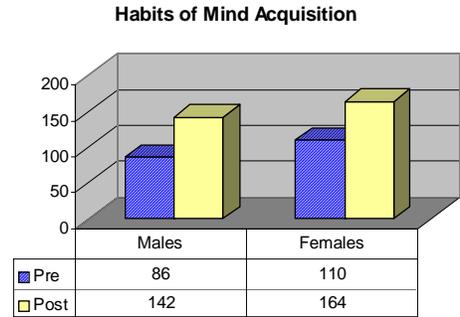
Women in group (1) were designated as Program participants and women in group (4) were designated as controls.

For both males and females, program participation was voluntary at all times. Over the period of the grant, the Program had 355 participants of whom 191 were female and 164 were male. These numbers are comparable to other small-scale correctional studies and allowed for statistical analyses. Within both genders, the comparison groups and the experimental groups were “high risk” offenders as measured by the LSI-R; there were no significant differences between the comparison and experimental groups. Males from both the Program and comparison groups had an average score of 26; among females, Program participants had an average score of 27 versus 26 for the control group.



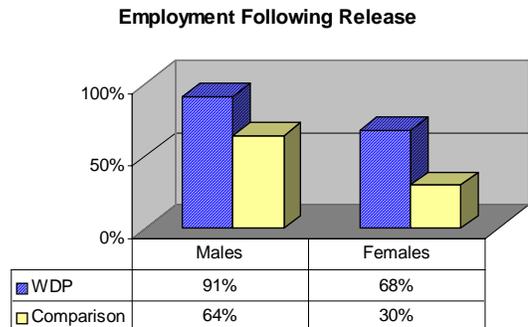
Results were generated by two methods. For post-release data, an online form was created to allow input by community casework staff into the Department of Corrections’ database that tracked monthly offenders’ employment, housing, support of dependents and community involvement. The DOC database was also used to determine re-incarceration. For pre-release data, a battery of questionnaires was administered to male offenders upon determination of eligibility and every six months thereafter; for the females, upon entry into the research project and immediately prior to release from the facility. Questionnaires included a demographics form and measures of criminal sentiments, coping strategies, social support and self-improvement/treatment motivation. In addition, the *Habits of Mind* Questionnaire, a measure created specifically for the Program’s evaluation and based on the 16 *Habits of Mind*, was administered. Respondents rate on a four-point Likert scale the degree to which they engage in activities or thinking patterns that correspond to each *Habit of Mind*. There are three items per *Habit of Mind*, resulting in a total score ranging from 0 to 192.

Habits of Mind. Within both male and female samples, Program participants on average demonstrated acquisition of the *Habits of Mind*. Ninety-three percent of the male participants showed an increase in the acquisition of the *Habits of Mind*, with average scores increasing from 86 pre-test to 142 post-test; for female participants, 96 percent showed an increase, with average scores increasing from 110 at intake to 164 pre-release.

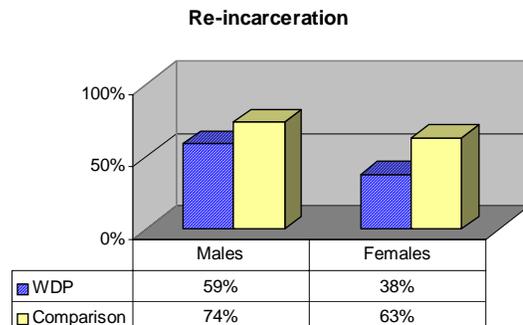


Looking at post-release data, of the overall number of participants, 46 male program participants and 29 in the male comparison group were used for the purpose of evaluating employment acquisition and re-incarceration rates due to the need for participants to have been released from prison for at least six months. This time constraint was based entirely on the maximum window allowed based on the grant end date. For the women, the four classifications of research participants who had been released for at least six months was distributed as follows: (1) HOM/Work – 42 (Program group); (2) HOM only – 10; (3) Work only – 58; and (4) Neither – 40 (control group). Data were analyzed for only the Program and control groups.

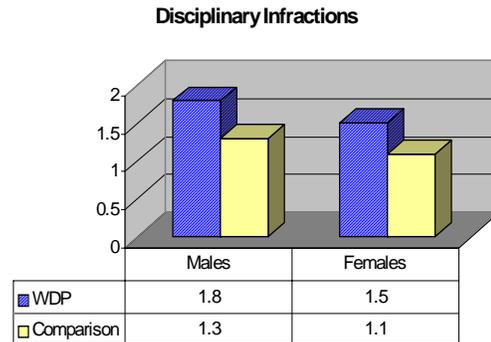
Employment. Program participants of both genders were significantly more likely to have obtained employment within 30 days of release. Ninety-one percent (n=42) of the males in the Program obtained employment within thirty days versus 64% (n=19) of the comparison group. Ninety-five percent (n=40/42) of the Program participants retained that employment versus 86% (n=16/19) for non-participants (not a significant difference). Seventy-one percent (n=30) of the females in the Program group obtained employment within 30 days versus 30% (n=12) of the controls; job retention for the female Program participants was 87% (n=26/30) versus 75% (n=9/12) for controls (not a significant difference). These numbers do not include offenders who were designated as “disabled” or “homemakers.”



Re-incarceration. For the males there was a 20% reduction in re-incarceration following release; fifty-nine percent (n=27) of the male participants were re-incarcerated as compared to 74% (n=19) of the comparison sample. For the females, there was a 37% reduction in re-incarceration following release; thirty-eight percent (n=16) of the female participants were re-incarcerated as compared to 60% (n=24) of the comparison sample.



Another Program goal was a significant reduction (and preferably an elimination of) disciplinary infractions while incarcerated and securing and retaining stable housing upon release. On this measure, there were no significant differences between groups for either gender. Program participation did not result in a reduction or elimination of disciplinary infractions. Within the past six months, male participants averaged 1.8 infractions as compared to 1.3 infractions averaged by non-participants. Female participants averaged 1.5 infractions versus and average of 1.1 infractions by non-participants. Slightly higher (though not significant) rates may be due to the higher expectations placed on program participants. This would be especially true among male participants, who resided in program living units.



When considering the three main offender-specific goals of the Workforce Development Program, the Program was highly successful. Participants of both genders showed significant increases in their acquisition of the *Habits of Mind*, an important life skill that appears to have contributed to post-release successes in securing employment and avoiding re-incarceration. The men in particular had very high rates of employment within 30 days of release. Rates for women participants were less. It is possible that women who were homemakers were incorrectly classified as unemployed by community casework staff filling out the online follow-up form. If indeed that were the case, employment figures for the women could be substantially different. The most impressive findings, however, involved the dramatic decreases in re-incarceration, especially among female offenders. For the males, the results are comparable, and in some ways better, than those found in other program outcome studies (e.g., Bouffard et al., 2000). For the females, the results are far superior to those found in previous studies (e.g., Dowden et al., 2001).

If the reductions in recidivism are applied to the need and cost for bed days in the correctional institutions, then it would demonstrate a cost savings or avoidance of well over one and one half million dollars to the state per year at the current level of program operation. In addition, the taxes paid by those men and women who left the correctional institutions and obtained and retained employment must be added to the analysis of economic benefit. The greatest benefit of all is the statistically significant reduction in the return rate to prison by the experimental group. Clearly, that is a public safety benefit for all.

Although the differences between groups were large enough to reach statistical significance for many comparisons, a significant limitation of the program evaluation was the relatively small sample that necessitated a quasi-experimental design due to the inability to randomly select male inmates into experimental (Program) and control groups. Even though efforts were made to ensure the Program and comparison groups were statistically equivalent on age and LSI-R scores, the possibility of selection bias exists. Selection bias is based on the belief that selection is never random; there is always a process that determines how participants are selected into a program. It

suggests that the selected participants may have unique characteristics that increase the possibility of successful outcome, even without program intervention. Replication of the Workforce Development Program in a larger prison setting would likely allow for random selection.

Another limitation was the post-release follow-up period. The project was constrained by the overall timeline of the federal grant. Although the first 90 days are generally the highest risk period for re-incarceration (especially when involving graduated sanctions), the limited (six-month) window requires a significant qualification. Ideally, the Department of Corrections would continue to track research participants for at least two years. A replication of the Program in a different jurisdiction should plan for a more extended follow-up period.

Finally, maintaining consistent research conditions over time in the three institutions proved difficult, due to leadership changes within the three institutions and the Department of Corrections, difficult. For example, at each of the institutions the chief institutional manager changed at least twice during the three year grant period and the leadership at Central Office changed over the grant period with the appointment of a new Commissioner and Program Executive. Instability of the organizational structure especially at the leadership level and the instability of the correctional population given overcrowding conditions in the institutions were variables that were consistently adjusted for by grant manger and principal investigator as emphasis was placed on maintaining the integrity of the research design within the institutions. Operation of the Program proceeded relatively smoothly at all three sites throughout the period of the project. The one exception being the need to downsize the program at the Northern State facility from fifty six beds to thirty four beds due to problems with overcrowding and population management. This issue of overcrowding with resultant problems regarding population management represented an ongoing concern for the project at both male facilities. It was perceived by program staff as well as participants to be a destabilizing influence on the workforce development culture that the project worked to establish.

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