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THE EFFECT OF CORRECTIONAL LITERACY EDUCATION PROGRAMS ON RECIDIVISM RATES

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Abstract

This evaluation proposal explores the projected impact of correctional literacy programs on recidivism and reentry outcomes among incarcerated adults, who overwhelmingly enter prison with literacy skills far below national averages, limiting their ability to secure employment, comply with legal obligations, and successfully reintegrate into society (Herrick, 1991; Robinson & Elliott, 1994). Prior research consistently shows that correctional education reduces recidivism by approximately 24% to 43% (Davis et al., 2013), suggesting that literacy instruction improves critical thinking, communication, and decision-making skills linked to long-term desistance. Guided by this evidence, the proposed evaluation uses a quantitative, quasi-experimental comparison-group design and secondary data from standardized assessments, correctional education records, and state recidivism databases to examine relationships between literacy gains and one-year and three-year return-to-prison rates. Anticipated findings, supported by national recidivism trends from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), suggest that literacy participants will experience higher academic gains and lower recidivism, with younger adults and individuals with fewer prior convictions likely benefiting most, while those with learning or communication disorders may require specialized support (Morken et al., 2021). These projected outcomes reinforce the importance of expanding literacy education, strengthening instructional consistency, integrating literacy with broader reentry services, and improving data collection systems within correctional facilities. If validated by future analysis, the evaluation would provide strong justification for literacy programs as cost-effective rehabilitative interventions that enhance employability, reduce reoffending, and improve public safety outcomes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As we face more societal issues, none is more profound and surprising than the connection between literacy and crime. Literacy is the basis of cognitive development, which is essential for navigating daily tasks, building economic stability, and achieving long-term personal growth. Beyond the ability to read and write, literacy serves as a cornerstone of both personal and societal development, with far-reaching implications in the context of the criminal justice system. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals with low literacy skills face a wide array of challenges, from reduced employment prospects to difficulties navigating social systems, which can ultimately increase their risk of participating in criminal activity (Herrick, 1991). These limitations may lead individuals down a path toward involvement with the criminal justice system, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that often culminates in incarceration.

Within prisons, literacy deficits remain widespread and severe. Many incarcerated individuals struggle with basic comprehension, making it difficult to understand legal documents, follow institutional rules, or participate in rehabilitative programming (Woodard et al., 2004). Amid growing evidence that poor literacy is linked to higher rates of recidivism, correctional institutions have reintroduced literacy-focused education programs as part of broader efforts to support rehabilitation and reentry. This program evaluation examines the extent to which literacy programs within correctional facilities influence recidivism and enhance post-release success.

Recent reforms and shifting correctional philosophies emphasize the importance of rehabilitation over punishment. Evidence suggests that inmates who participate in education programs are significantly less likely to reoffend, more likely to secure

employment after release, and better equipped to reintegrate into society (Davis et al., 2013). This creates a strong incentive for correctional institutions and policymakers to prioritize educational programming, particularly literacy development, as part of evidence-based correctional reform efforts. This evaluation seeks to generate evidence-based insights that can inform decisions by correctional administrators, policymakers, and stakeholders who support reentry initiatives.

Background and Context

The United States continues to have one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, and low literacy is a major issue among the prison population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Research shows that a large majority of inmates read far below grade level, and many have struggled with education long before they entered the criminal justice system (Robinson & Elliott, 1994). Literacy involves more than the ability to read words on a page. It includes understanding information, communicating effectively, and using basic reasoning skills, which are essential abilities that are important for work, personal decision-making, and everyday life (Woodard et al., 2024).Education in prisons has existed in different forms for many years. In the early periods of American corrections, education was viewed as a way to improve moral behavior and help people reenter society (Clark, 1991). Over time, different political views and policy priorities caused shifts in the amount of support given to prison education. During the tough-on-crime era of the late 20th century, many programs lost funding and attention. However, as evidence grew showing the benefits of education for reducing recidivism, interest began to increase again (Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

Federal policies have also influenced how states approach correctional education. The Second Chance Act of 2008 was created to support reentry programs and reduce repeat offending, and literacy training has been one of the main areas of focus (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). More recently, the restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals in 2023 expanded access to higher education and renewed interest in academic skill-building, including literacy (Federal Student Aid, 2023). Still, programs face challenges, including limited staff, inconsistent funding, overcrowded facilities, and varying levels of administrative support. Overall, literacy programs play a major role in many facilities' efforts to reduce recidivism and prepare inmates for reentry. Because resources are limited and public scrutiny remains high, it is important to evaluate how well these programs are working.

Purpose of the Evaluation

Despite national attention and growing support for correctional education, recidivism rates in the United States remain high, with approximately two-thirds of formerly incarcerated individuals rearrested within three years of release (Harlow, 2003). Although literacy programs are available across correctional facilities, there is limited evaluative evidence on how effectively these programs reduce recidivism and contribute to successful reentry. The absence of clear, data-driven assessments of literacy program effectiveness hinders policymakers and correctional administrators from making informed decisions about resource allocation, program expansion, and quality improvements. Therefore, a systematic evaluation is necessary to determine whether participation in correctional literacy programs leads to meaningful reductions in recidivism and improved post-release outcomes.

The purpose of this program evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of literacy programs within correctional facilities in reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals. This evaluation focuses on determining whether program participation leads to improved literacy skills, increased employability, and reduced likelihood of reoffending. By examining program implementation, participation rates, and outcome measures, this evaluation aims to provide actionable insights that can guide correctional policy and strategic decision-making. This evaluation is specifically conducted as an outcome-based evaluation, assessing whether the intended results for reduced recidivism and improved literacy are achieved.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The relationship between literacy and recidivism has been examined across multiple fields, including criminology, psychology, correctional education, and public policy. A consistent finding across these areas is that literacy skills play a critical role in shaping individuals' life outcomes. This literature review examines the existing research on literacy and recidivism, the effectiveness of correctional literacy programs, theoretical perspectives that explain how literacy influences behavior, and relevant policy frameworks that guide correctional education.

Literacy, Crime, and Recidivism

A foundational argument in the literature is that literacy deficits are closely linked to criminal justice involvement. Individuals with limited reading and writing abilities often come from marginalized educational backgrounds, face economic hardship, and encounter barriers to employment, which are all factors that statistically increase their

likelihood of engaging in crime (Robinson & Elliott, 1994). Herrick (1991) explains that these individuals often struggle with everyday tasks, such as understanding contracts, completing paperwork, or comprehending workplace safety guidelines. Without these basic skills, individuals face limited pathways to legitimate employment and stability, increasing the chances of committing crimes and being incarcerated.

Studies focusing specifically on incarcerated populations indicate that literacy levels among inmates are significantly lower than those in the general population. The National Center for Education Statistics (1994) found that inmates score substantially lower in reading comprehension and document literacy. Morken et al. (2021), in a scoping review of literacy and communication disorders among incarcerated adults, found high rates of reading, language, and comprehension difficulties across correctional systems. These challenges place inmates at a disadvantage in navigating prison procedures, accessing available programs, and preparing for reentry.

Low literacy also affects an individual's ability to understand legal instructions and meet probation or parole expectations (Woodard et al., 2004). Research indicates that individuals with low literacy skills struggle to interpret written directives from the courts, probation offices, and treatment programs, increasing the likelihood of noncompliance (Dawe, 2017). Many individuals return to custody due to technical violations rather than new crimes, and literacy limitations can play a role in misunderstanding reporting requirements, written rules, or program obligations (Kaeble, 2023). These findings highlight literacy not simply as an academic issue, but as a key factor in compliance with the criminal justice system, decision-making, and long-term reentry success.

Correctional Literacy Programs and Recidivism

A large body of research supports correctional education as an effective intervention for reducing recidivism. Stickle and Schuster's (2023) meta-analysis found that inmates who participate in prison education programs are approximately 24% less likely to reoffend compared to those who receive no educational services. This finding aligns with earlier studies, for example, Davis et al. (2013), who concluded that educational programming reduces recidivism by 43%, making it one of the most cost-effective correctional interventions available.

Other studies emphasize that literacy serves as a gateway to success in other rehabilitative programs. Vacca (2011) argues that literacy supports the development of social capital, enabling individuals to build positive relationships, access community resources, and navigate institutional processes. Improving literacy can increase individuals' self-confidence, persistence, and ability to set goals, which are all traits associated with a decreased likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior (Vacca, 2011).

Beyond recidivism rates, literacy programs contribute to improved employment outcomes. Aos et al. (2017) found that inmates who completed basic adult education were more likely to secure employment post-release compared to non-participants. Employment is a strong predictor of recidivism, and literacy is essential for job applications, resumes, workplace communication, and training (Raphael, 2011). These factors highlight the long-term impact and importance of literacy acquisition.

Despite positive findings, the effectiveness of programs can vary significantly. Brosens et al. (2024) note that institutional factors, including available resources, teacher qualifications, class sizes, and program duration, can directly affect learning

outcomes. Facilities with stable funding, dedicated learning spaces, and trained instructors tend to report stronger improvements in literacy and lower recidivism rates. This variation underscores the need for programs to be assessed based on their implementation conditions, not only their intended outcomes.

Policy and Legislative Frameworks for Penitentiary Education

Several federal and state-level policies shape the development and funding of literacy programs within correctional institutions. The Second Chance Act of 2008 is an influential piece of legislation that aims to reduce recidivism by supporting programs shown to improve post-release outcomes, and literacy training is frequently included as one of the available grants dedicated to educational and vocational instruction (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Another major policy influence is the restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals in 2023. This change, implemented through federal financial aid policy updates, allows inmates to receive federal financial support for postsecondary education (Federal Student Aid, 2023). While Pell Grants primarily support higher education, they indirectly strengthen literacy programs because inmates must demonstrate foundational skills to qualify for college-level coursework.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 also plays a significant role. WIOA supports adult education, including correctional education, and requires states to integrate literacy, employment training, and reentry strategies into workforce development plans (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). WIOA also encourages collaboration between correctional institutions and community organizations.

Together, these policies establish a strong foundation for correctional literacy efforts. However, they vary in implementation across states, leading to inconsistencies

in program quality, access, and outcomes. This inconsistency strengthens the need for ongoing evaluation of literacy programs to determine whether they are meeting policy goals.

Theoretical Frameworks on Literacy and Criminal Behavior

The relationship between literacy and crime can be understood through several theoretical perspectives. The frameworks, which are Social Learning Theory, Strain Theory, and Cognitive Behavioral Theory, are especially relevant in explaining the relationship between literacy, decision-making, and propensity for crime. These theories also provide a foundation for understanding how literacy programs operate as rehabilitative tools within correctional environments.

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains that people learn behaviors by watching others and seeing the outcomes of their actions. This theory is often used in criminology because many people learn criminal behavior through peers, family, or their environment. Literacy connects to this theory because reading and writing skills help people understand information, think through decisions, and recognize consequences. Research has shown that individuals with better literacy and cognitive skills are more likely to recognize risky behavior and avoid it (Walters, 2016). Higher literacy also helps inmates succeed in prison programs that teach problem-solving and decision-making (Jolliffe et al., 2018). In this way, building literacy gives individuals the tools they need to learn healthier behaviors and break away from criminal influences.

Strain Theory offers another explanation for the link between low literacy and crime. First introduced by Merton (1938), the theory argues that when people cannot reach their goals through legal opportunities, they may feel pressure or "strain" that

pushes them toward crime. Education and employment are two important ways people try to achieve these goals. When someone struggles with reading and writing, they are more likely to fall behind in school, drop out, and have trouble finding stable work (Fleming et al., 2014). These setbacks can cause frustration and make it harder to stay on a lawful path. Studies also show that adults with low literacy face more unemployment, which increases the pressure to meet their needs in other ways (Lochner, 2010). Literacy programs reduce this strain by improving educational skills, creating more opportunities, and helping people feel more confident about their future.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) focuses on how a person's thoughts influence their actions. Many people in the criminal justice system struggle with impulsive decisions, negative thinking, and difficulty processing consequences (Wilson et al., 2005). Literacy can support the goals of CBT because reading and writing help strengthen thinking skills, improve self-control, and support better problem-solving. Research shows that literacy training can improve reasoning and reflection, which lowers the likelihood of making impulsive or harmful decisions (Blonigen et al., 2014). It also helps people communicate better and handle conflicts in positive ways (Hurry et al., 2012). Because cognitive skills are linked to recidivism, improving literacy can serve as an important part of behavior change for people in correctional settings.

Chapter 3: Evaluation Methodology

This methodology explains how the evaluation of correctional literacy programs will be designed and conducted. The purpose is to outline the approach used to determine whether literacy instruction contributes to reduced recidivism and improved

reentry outcomes. The chapter includes the evaluation design, evaluation criteria, population and sampling approach, data sources and instruments, data collection procedures, variables and measures, the data analysis plan, and ethical considerations. Because this project is structured as a program evaluation proposal, the chapter is written as a plan for how the evaluation will be carried out using available correctional data.

Evaluation Design

This evaluation uses a quantitative outcome evaluation design to determine whether participation in prison literacy programs affects recidivism. A quantitative outcome evaluation is appropriate because the goal is to assess the impact of an existing program rather than design or revise it (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2015). The evaluation also fits the definition of an outcome evaluation because it focuses on measuring the program's results, such as literacy gains and post-release behavior. A quasi-experimental comparison-group design will also be utilized because random assignment is not possible within correctional education settings (Drake et al., 2019). In this approach, inmates who complete a literacy program will be compared to inmates who did not participate or who did not complete the minimum instructional hours. Although this design does not provide the same level of control as an experiment, it is widely accepted in criminal justice evaluations because it allows for meaningful comparisons when programs are voluntary. The evaluation will follow a logic model approach by linking program activities such as literacy instruction, outputs including attendance and instructional hours, and short- and long-term outcomes such as literacy gains and reduced recidivism.

Evaluation Criteria

The criteria used to determine a successful program evaluation will focus on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Relevance assesses whether the program addresses a meaningful need within the correctional population. Because a large percentage of inmates enter prison with below-average literacy skills (Morken et al., 2021), literacy instruction clearly targets an area of need. This criterion evaluates how well the program reflects the educational deficits of incarcerated adults and whether it supports reentry goals. Effectiveness focuses on whether the program achieves its intended outcomes, which are increases in literacy scores and reduced recidivism. Effectiveness will be measured by comparing participant outcomes with those of non-participants while controlling for demographic and criminal history variables. Efficiency considers whether program resources like funding, staffing, and classroom time are used in a way that maximizes benefits. Prior research shows that correctional education is one of the most cost-effective strategies for reducing recidivism (Davis et al., 2013). Impact examines the broader long-term effects of the program beyond immediate outcomes. This can include the future influence on reentry success, job stability, and the end of incarceration cycles in the justice system. Sustainability refers to the program's ability to continue long-term. This criterion examines whether staffing, funding, curriculum quality, and institutional support are adequate for maintaining the program. Sustainability is critical in corrections, where programs often face budget cuts or staffing shortages (Brosens et al., 2024).

Sampling

The population for this evaluation includes adult inmates housed in state-operated and private correctional facilities that offer structured literacy programs. Since this is a program evaluation, the sample will include individuals who were incarcerated during a specific timeframe, had access to a literacy education, and completed at least one literacy assessment. This sampling will be divided into two main groups, which are literacy education program participants and non-participants. Demographic variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, educational history, prior convictions, and institutional behavior will be collected. These factors are important because they influence both literacy levels and recidivism risk (Morken et al, 2021).

Data Sources

This evaluation uses secondary administrative data, which is appropriate because literacy programs routinely collect assessment scores and correctional agencies track recidivism. Data for the evaluation will be drawn from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis of program effectiveness. Correctional education records will provide pre- and post-literacy assessment scores using tools such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), along with attendance records, instructional hours, and program completion reports. Additional information will be collected from correctional administrative databases, including demographic characteristics, criminal history, and institutional behavior indicators such as disciplinary infractions. Long-term outcomes will be measured using state recidivism databases that track rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration outcomes at one-year and three-year follow-up intervals, consistent with Bureau of Justice Statistics reporting standards (BJS, 2023).

Variables and Measures

-Independent Variable

The primary independent variable in this evaluation is literacy program participation. This variable captures the extent of inmate engagement in correctional education and will be operationalized in several ways: (1) participation status coded as participant or non-participant, (2) total instructional hours received during the program period, and (3) program completion status, indicating whether the individual successfully fulfilled all program requirements. These measures allow for both categorical and continuous analyses of program exposure to determine whether greater participation is associated with improved outcomes.

-Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this study is recidivism. Recidivism will be measured using multiple time-based and event-based indicators commonly used in correctional research. Primary measures include any rearrest within one year and any rearrest within three years following release. A supplemental outcome measure will include reincarceration for a new offense or technical violation to provide a broader understanding of post-release outcomes. These measures align with standardized state and federal reporting practices, allowing for comparability with existing research and correctional performance benchmarks.

-Control Variables

A set of control variables will be included to account for factors known to influence both program participation and recidivism outcomes. These variables include age, gender, race or ethnicity, educational level at intake, prior criminal history, and

institutional misconduct while incarcerated. Controlling for these variables strengthens internal validity by reducing alternative explanations for observed differences in recidivism outcomes between participants and non-participants.

-Continuous Measure

Literacy gain scores will be calculated by subtracting the pre-test score from the post-test score on standardized tests like the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS). This score will be used as an additional outcome in the study and may help show whether taking part in the literacy program leads to lower recidivism, which can support future analysis on how and why the program works.

Data Analysis

The data analysis plan will include both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the literacy program. Descriptive statistics will be used first to summarize key characteristics of the sample, including frequencies and percentages for demographic variables such as age, race or ethnicity, and educational background, which are commonly used in correctional education research to understand baseline differences among participants (Davis et al., 2013). Mean scores from pre- and post-literacy assessments will also be examined to identify average skill changes over time, and recidivism rates will be calculated for both literacy program participants and non-participants. This descriptive phase provides a foundation for later inferential testing by establishing patterns in literacy performance and justice outcomes (MacArthur et al., 2010).

Inferential statistical tests will then be applied to determine whether observed differences between the groups are statistically meaningful. Independent samples t-tests will be used to examine whether literacy gains differ significantly between participants and non-participants, while chi-square tests will assess group differences in recidivism outcomes (Field, 2018). Logistic regression modeling will be conducted to predict the likelihood of recidivism while controlling for factors such as age, prior criminal history, and institutional behavior, allowing researchers to determine whether program participation independently reduces the probability of reoffending (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) may be included to adjust for initial literacy score differences and further improve internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). Statistical significance for all tests will be set at a threshold of $p < .05$, which is consistent with standard social science research practices.

Ethical Considerations

This evaluation will rely on previously collected data that has already been stripped of identifying information, which helps protect participant safety and lowers ethical risk. All files will be kept confidential by storing them on secure, encrypted platforms that require password access. Personal identifiers, such as names or Social Security numbers, will not be included to protect individual privacy. Before the data is accessed or analyzed, approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be secured to ensure ethical compliance. Findings will be shared only in summary form rather than at the individual level, so that no participant can be recognized. Because the research involves individuals who may be considered a vulnerable population, special

attention will be given to using respectful wording and avoiding statements that could reinforce stigma or negative assumptions.

Chapter 4: Expected Results/Findings

The results and findings in this section represent the anticipated outcomes from the evaluation examining the impact of literacy programs on recidivism among adult inmates. Because the evaluation relies on secondary data, the findings discussed represent expected trends based on national datasets, prior research, theoretical frameworks, and the logic model guiding the study. The expected trends are informed by empirical evidence showing strong connections between literacy improvement, reduced recidivism, and successful reentry outcomes.

Literacy Measures

Based on decades of correctional education research, it is expected that inmates who participate in literacy programs will show measurable improvements in reading comprehension, writing ability, and overall literacy assessment scores (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). Previous studies using standardized tools such as TABE and CASAS consistently report meaningful increases for inmates who participate in structured instruction (Vacca, 2011). These gains are anticipated to be highest among individuals who complete a full instructional cycle, as opposed to those who attend inconsistently. Figure 1 below illustrates this trend using TABE scores. As shown, average TABE reading grade-equivalent (GE) scores for incarcerated adults typically fall within the 6.5–6.8 GE range, consistent with prior studies documenting substantial literacy deficits among incarcerated populations (Virginia Department of Corrections, 2019). The

expected values, modeled using national adult basic education (ABE) studies, project

literacy gains increasing GE scores to the 8.4–8.7 range, reflecting the approximate

1.5–2.0 grade-level improvements commonly observed in ABE and correctional

education programs (Harlow, 2003). Facility-level differences are expected to moderate

these gains. Institutions with consistent staffing, adequate instructional hours, and

structured literacy curricula are likely to outperform facilities with staff shortages or

interrupted programming (Brosens et al., 2024). Overall, the projected literacy outcomes

are expected to validate the importance of structured literacy instruction in most
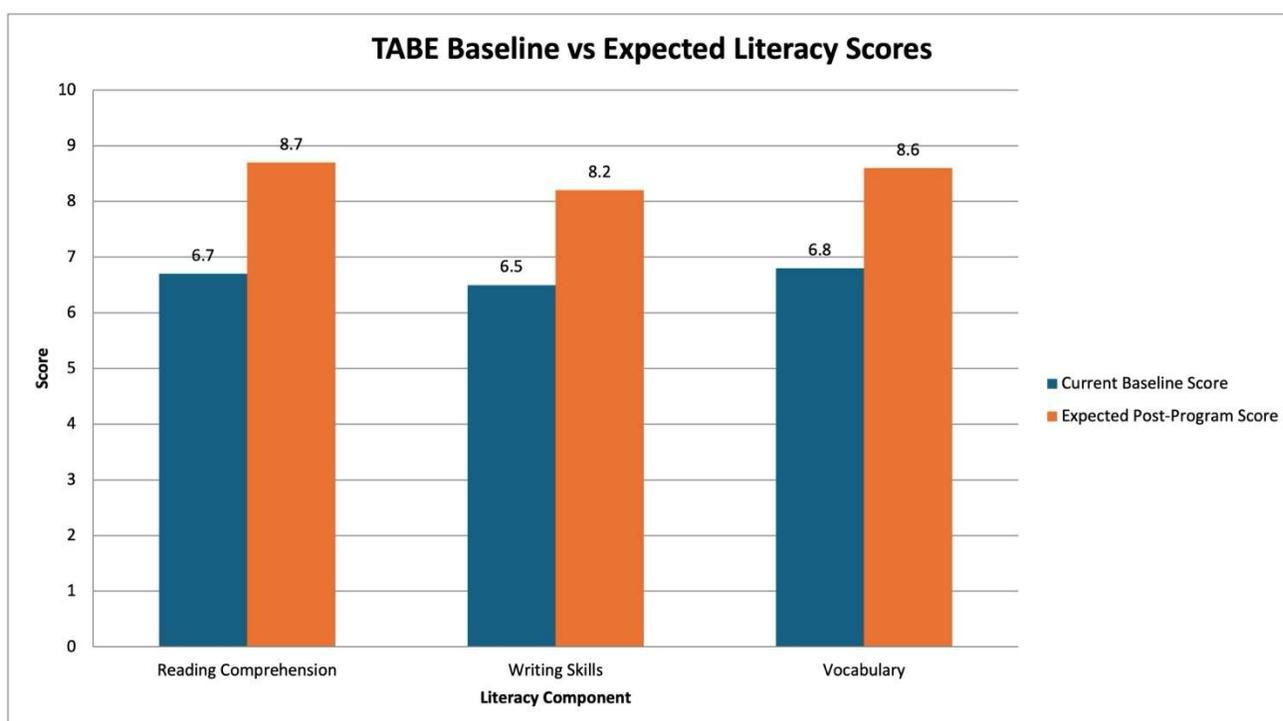
correctional facilities.

Figure 1: TABE Baseline & Expected Literacy Score. Baseline established from the Virginia Department of Corrections. (2019). *Education services annual report*. Richmond, VA.

Recidivism Rates

Consistent with prior research, this evaluation expects a significant inverse

relationship between literacy participation and recidivism (Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

Inmates who receive literacy instruction are anticipated to exhibit lower recidivism rates than those who do not participate. Literacy development supports cognitive skills such as reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving, which can reduce the likelihood of returning to criminal behavior (Herrick, 1991). National meta-analyses further support this expectation by reporting a 24% to 43% reduction in recidivism among individuals who participate in correctional education programs (Davis et al., 2013). This projected pattern is illustrated in Figure 2 after averaging the data from national databases. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018) shows that individuals released from state prisons in 2005 had a 1-year return-to-prison rate of 30.4%, whereas individuals released in 2012 saw a reduced rate of 19.9%. When applying expected reductions associated with literacy programming, projected values are expected to decrease these rates to 22.8% and 14.9%. A similar pattern appears in 3-year return-to-prison rates, for instance, the 2005 cohort showed approximately 50% recidivism, while the 2012 cohort demonstrated about 39% (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Projected values drop these to 37.5% and 29.3%, indicating the substantial potential impact of literacy instruction. Chi-square testing should reveal significant differences in recidivism between literacy participants and non-participants, and logistic regression analysis is expected to identify literacy participation as an independent predictor of reduced recidivism, consistent with national findings (Davis et al., 2013).
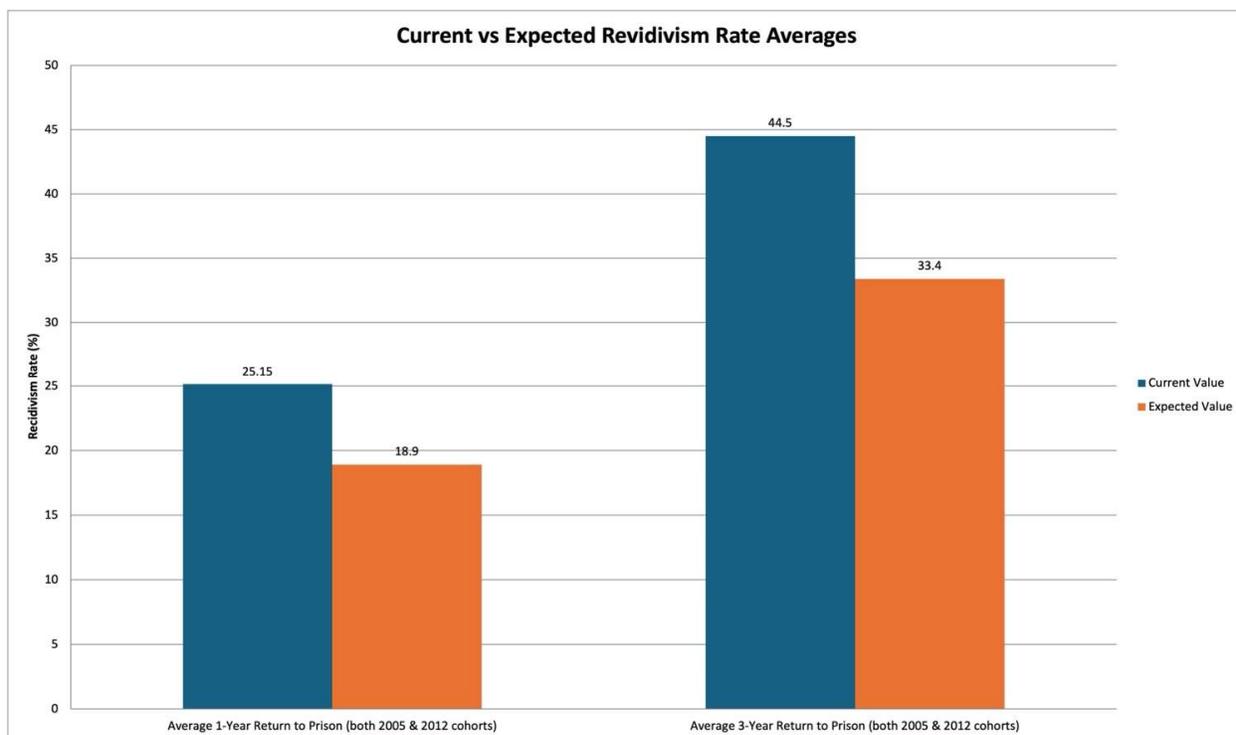
Figure 2: Current and Expected Recidivism Rates. Current rates retrieved from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2018). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2014*. U.S. Department of Justice.

Group Differences and Predictive Factors

Expected findings also suggest that there may be clear differences among participants based on demographic characteristics and criminal history factors. Research in correctional education shows that younger participants and those with fewer prior convictions often demonstrate stronger academic gains because they may have fewer barriers to learning and may still retain foundational literacy skills (Davis et al., 2013). These increases in literacy may also strengthen the effect of the program on reducing recidivism, since individuals who improve their reading and writing skills are typically better able to understand legal instructions, meet supervision requirements, and access employment opportunities after release (Woodard et al., 2004). At the same time, individuals with communication disorders, learning disabilities, or other cognitive challenges may progress more slowly. Studies indicate that when these learners are not

provided with structured or specialized instruction, literacy growth can lag behind other groups, even when motivation is high (Morken et al., 2021). It is also reasonable to expect variation among different inmate groups. Individuals with fewer prior convictions or those who enter programming earlier in their incarceration often show stronger educational gains, and therefore may benefit more noticeably in terms of recidivism outcomes (Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Interpretation of Expected Results/Findings

The anticipated findings suggest a strong and meaningful relationship between literacy program participation and reductions in both 1-year and 3-year recidivism rates. Drawing from projected values, inmates who receive literacy instruction are expected to have significantly lower rates of reincarceration than those who do not participate. These projections were modeled using national recidivism trends reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018), combined with the average 24% to 43% reduction observed in national correctional education meta-analyses (Davis et al., 2013). When these reductions are applied to historical cohorts, the resulting projections consistently show lower likelihoods of reoffending, supporting the theory that literacy programs enhance cognitive functioning and decision-making skills that reduce criminal behavior (Herrick, 1991). The projected literacy gains modeled in Chapter 4 reinforce the potential for structured instruction to produce tangible academic growth. These expected trends are consistent with adult basic education studies showing that

incarcerated learners often make significant strides when provided with stable, well-supported instruction (Harlow, 2003).

Limitations of Extant Literature

Although research shows that literacy programs can reduce recidivism, several limitations make it difficult to evaluate their true effectiveness. Many studies rely on self-reported participation or incomplete institutional records, which may not accurately reflect how much instruction inmates received or how much progress they made (Harlow, 2003). Additionally, literacy assessments are not standardized across facilities, making it challenging to compare results or determine whether skill gains are consistent from one program to another.

Another limitation is that many studies treat all correctional education programs as if they are the same. In reality, basic literacy courses, GED preparation, and vocational training differ significantly in goals and outcomes. Basic literacy programs focus on reading and writing skills, while GED and vocational courses are more closely tied to employment outcomes. When researchers group these programs together, the unique impact of literacy instruction becomes harder to identify, and important differences in effectiveness may be overlooked.

A further issue is that most studies examine short-term outcomes, such as recidivism within one to three years. Very few studies track participants long enough to understand whether literacy gains support long-term desistance from crime. This gap is especially important because sustained literacy improvements may be necessary for lasting reintegration. In addition, research often overlooks differences among subgroups of inmates, including women, older adults, English-language learners, and individuals

with learning or communication disorders. Morken et al. (2021) note that many inmates require specialized instruction that many facilities are not equipped to provide, suggesting that program effectiveness may vary widely across populations.

Variability in program implementation also limits generalizability. Correctional facilities differ in funding, staffing, curriculum quality, security procedures, and institutional culture, which are all factors that influence whether literacy programs succeed (Brosens et al., 2024). These differences highlight the need for evaluations that consider local conditions rather than assuming all programs operate the same way. A shortage of long-term studies, inadequate distinctions between program types, limited subgroup analysis, and inconsistent program delivery are all considered gaps in prior research. Addressing these gaps is essential for improving literacy programs and strengthening correctional policy. The present evaluation contributes to this effort by examining literacy programming within its specific institutional context and assessing its relationship to recidivism outcomes.

Limitations of Evaluation Studies

Because this study is an evaluation proposal rather than a completed data analysis, several limitations should be recognized. The anticipated findings are based on projections from national and prior research, which means results may differ from what occurs in the specific correctional setting under review. The availability and consistency of literacy assessment records may also vary across facilities, creating possible barriers to accurate or complete analysis. Program fidelity presents another limitation, as differences in instructor training, instructional quality, classroom structure, and program stability may influence true outcomes and are not fully measurable at the

proposal stage. Additionally, the current evaluation design does not yet include qualitative feedback from educators or participants, which could provide meaningful context and insight into how the program operates and why certain outcomes occur.

Recommendations and Implications for Public Safety Policy and Practice

If the anticipated findings are supported through future data collection and analysis, they would have significant implications for public safety policy. First, literacy programs should be recognized not merely as academic services but as core components of a rehabilitative correctional strategy. The projected reductions in recidivism suggest that literacy instruction directly contributes to safer communities by reducing the number of individuals returning to the criminal justice system.

In addition, improvements in literacy are closely tied to employment outcomes, one of the strongest protective factors against reoffending (Woodard et al., 2004). As shown in both the literature and the projected results, individuals with higher literacy skills are better equipped to compete in the labor market and maintain stable employment (Aos et al., 2017). Correctional agencies and policymakers should therefore view literacy education as a foundational investment in long-term community safety and workforce readiness.

The disparities in access to correctional education remain a challenge across many states. Not all facilities have the staffing or resources needed to consistently deliver literacy programming. The anticipated findings reinforce the importance of expanding access to programs so that educational benefits are not limited to certain institutions or inmate groups. Another recommendation is integrating literacy instruction with reentry services, vocational programs, and behavioral interventions, which could

further strengthen reentry support. The projected outcomes underscore the importance of approaching correctional literacy from a systems perspective. Effective rehabilitation often requires coordinated collaboration between correctional educators, reentry specialists, probation and parole officers, and community partners. Improving literacy rates within correctional settings can support a broader network of public safety stakeholders.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should continue building on this proposal by exploring long-term effects of correctional literacy programs, especially through studies that follow participants for several years after release to better understand sustained behavior change and long-term reductions in criminal activity. It would also be useful to compare different types of correctional education, such as literacy classes, GED preparation, digital literacy instruction, and vocational training, to identify which programs work best for different groups of people. More focused studies are also needed to examine how these programs support specific populations, including women, older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people learning English as a second language, since their experiences and learning needs may differ from those of the general population. In addition, examining factors related to how programs are delivered, for example, teacher preparation, staff consistency, classroom environment, and curriculum design, may help explain why some programs lead to better results than others. Future evaluations may also benefit from mixed-methods designs that combine both quantitative data and qualitative feedback from participants, instructors, correctional staff, and reentry service

providers, since hearing directly from those involved can help improve instruction and strengthen support systems after release.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this evaluation proposal was to examine the role of correctional literacy education in reducing recidivism and improving post-release outcomes. The central problem addressed throughout the manuscript is the lack of consistent evaluative evidence demonstrating whether literacy programming meaningfully influences reentry success, despite longstanding assumptions that education supports rehabilitation (Davis et al., 2013). Recidivism rates in the United States remain high, and a substantial percentage of incarcerated individuals enter correctional facilities with significant literacy deficits, limiting their ability to comply with institutional expectations, communicate effectively, or participate in rehabilitative programs (Morken et al., 2021). Because correctional systems continue to invest in literacy programming without standardized measurement or longitudinal evaluation, this proposal responds to a critical gap by outlining a systematic approach for determining whether literacy participation corresponds with reduced reoffending behaviors.

Based on the evaluation model and existing research reviewed in earlier chapters, expected outcomes indicate that literacy program participants will demonstrate measurable academic improvement and lower recidivism rates compared to non-participants (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). Anticipated results align with national trend data showing that structured educational programming in prisons is associated with meaningful reductions in reoffending, increased employability, and improved

cognitive functioning (Aos et al., 2017). The proposed analysis suggests that some demographic and criminogenic factors, like age, number of prior convictions, and educational history, may influence outcome strength, with younger participants and individuals with lower criminal histories expected to show greater academic gains and stronger post-release outcomes(Stickle & Schuster, 2023). At the same time, individuals with learning or communication disorders may require differentiated instruction to ensure equitable benefit (Morken et al., 2021).

The significance of this evaluation extends beyond program performance measurement and contributes to ongoing conversations in public safety, correctional policy, and community reentry. If anticipated trends are supported through future data collection, the findings would reinforce literacy instruction as a key evidence-based practice rather than a supplemental educational offering. As correctional systems shift toward rehabilitation-focused models, evaluations such as this one can support strategic decision-making related to resource allocation, program expansion, and staff development. Additionally, the evaluation framework encourages correctional agencies to adopt long-term monitoring practices and consistent assessment standards to ensure accountability and measurable progress.

In conclusion, this evaluation project highlights literacy education programs as a promising and potentially transformative element of correctional rehabilitation. Although the findings remain hypothetical until the evaluation is conducted, the consistency between projected outcomes and existing research provides compelling justification for expanding literacy instruction within correctional settings. Implementing the recommended strategies and conducting the full evaluation will support the

development of more effective, equitable, and evidence-based correctional education

practices that can ultimately strengthen reentry success and enhance public safety.

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