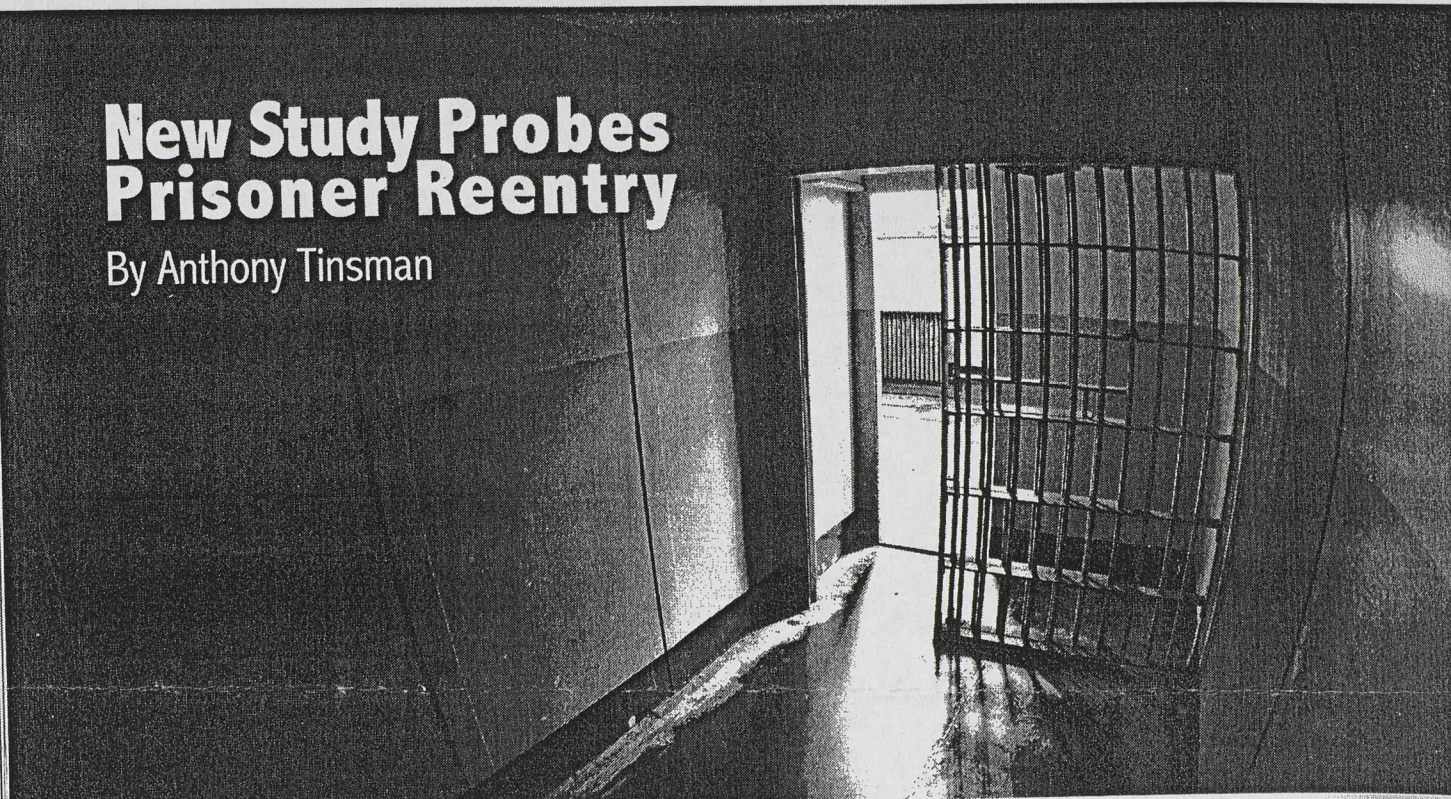


New Study Probes Prisoner Reentry

By Anthony Tinsman



I have a unique job.

As the program designer of Take a Load Off (TLO) it's my job to teach it, train others to teach it, and evaluate the programs effectiveness. Since July 2014, with support from our proactive Reentry Affairs Coordinator Mrs. Guthrie, TLO has provided standardized curriculum and one-on-one guidance to prisoners for their reentry needs. This required a new work detail of 24 inmates, called Reentry Technicians, who provide the services: such as applications for vital documents and facilitating courses in each housing unit. Their class rooms are called the Reentry Opportunity Center (ROC). That's a lot of progress in under 5 years, considering TLO started with a ruler and ball point pen on my bed covers.

Now it's the back bone of a reentry program.

It shouldn't be surprising that team work between prisoners and Staff members can yield results. Though they are the exception. It takes time.

Susan Kieffer, Reentry affairs Coordinator at Ray Brook (1) wrote about such a collaborative effort in her introduction to the "Essential Reentry Resource Book", a book which was the result of the Ray Brook Reentry Initiative. "Thanks to the many currently and previously incarcerated men and women who have contributed their invaluable time and experience to this project. Without their desire for accurate information and unwavering belief in this book, we would not have been challenged to dig deeply, to probe so many resources, to look beyond the readily available answers for true solutions." Mr. Keiffer writes, "Nor would we have had the motivation or the opportunity to test these findings and document the results so thoroughly."

The evaluation:

The current evaluation of TLO / ROC is simple. Answers this question: how many prisoner are willing to participate and what impacts have we made so far? The role of the TLO / ROC program is special in the BOP, since our Unit Based program is the first of it kind in the system. Collaborating with Staff was a natural step and adds empirical data about what we do. I don't want the program to get undue credit or miss any opportunities to be more effective, just because it's been described as a Best Practice by regional officials doesn't set me at ease. There are plenty of programs out there that get "results" then falter because those findings are inaccurate. We don't need rose tinted glasses, we can change the program as needed.

Even common sense changes like expanding programs and resources to serve an entire population of offenders more effectively needs to be studied.

Since November we've gathered 300 complete surveys, or roughly 20% of the general population in Forrest City medium. The Reentry Affairs Coordinator, Counselors and Case managers have administered course-credit and tracked requests for applications. I've also conducted 100 interviews and a case study of the institutions progress which will be available in a Report in the coming months.

Summary of findings:

1. 75.5% had participated in Instructional programs elsewhere, only 3% said they would not voluntarily participate in unit-based reentry programs.
2. 87.3% were concerned with employment after release from prison, but only 49.7% had an institutional job.
3. 73.7% had a GED, only 14.3% had post-secondary education or certification in a trade.
4. 45.1% were first time offenders, almost all of whom stated that employment concerned them the most, meanwhile, repeat offenders almost unanimously were confident about a job.
5. Repeat offenders stated, along with 29.1% of others, that getting their Driver's License was the biggest barrier.
6. 93.8% had an average of two out of seven vital documents (2/7). Surprisingly 26.2% of these prisoners said they did not need help locating or completing applications one-on-one to receive those documents.

That last one was interesting. Our Survey had plenty of YES / NO questions, such as 'Do you have a GED, Secondary Schooling, or Trade Certification and Experience' or 'Is this your first time preparing to reenter society? If not please explain'. But the survey was also designed to measure prisoners current understating of the reentry process and their perceptions of the resources available to them.

There were checks and balances.

For example: Brian, who has zero of seven (0/7) vital documents recommended for reentry, said "I don't think I require one-on-one help." Charlie, had five of seven (5/7) vital documents, and said "[one-on-one] may be helpful." What's interesting about those two men you ask, well both men had over 10 years' experience in trade labor and at least 2 years in college. How can one be so different from the other? How can the difference widen so much as the education and life-experience levels decrease with other prisoners?

Well... Results are effected by people's confirmation bias. Research studies on self-evaluation and positive illusions have found that the worst self-evaluators are people who lack skills. David Dunning, a renowned researcher called this the "unskilled and unaware" phenomenon (2). This is certainly the case with many prisoners who attend reentry courses but come with an illusory belief that they can overcome unaddressed issues in their lives with sheer will power -or darkly, being more sneaky next time.

It is a sad fact of human nature.

Inside the evaluation:

Digging around a table top loaded with surveys, I stopped several times, surprised with a few findings (possibly suffering a little bias myself). Only 6.1% of inmates expressed a negative or ambivalent attitude towards participating in unit programs. I expected there to be more. Prisoners complain so much I figured they would just gripe their way right past the obvious need for Reentry Opportunity Centers.

The majority expressed a positive opinion like 'Kevin', who has served time in state prison previously and was shipped directly to federal prison to serve another sentence for conspiracy charges, "I think [classes] are a big help to everyone" he stated. In an interview with another "positive" participant the sentiment was explained more colorfully but basically the same.

Meanwhile negative opinion had plenty of color to make up for the lack of frequency. Jessie, a repeat offender, answered NO to voluntary participation in our programs, stating "I'm on my own time". No less stubborn but more ambivalent responses were presented, like this statement from another repeat offender "I am still working on myself and don't want class... no one can tell me how to stay free."

Thousands of studies on Psychology indicate that people do better when they have high self-confidence. Psychologist Albert Bandura and Dale H. Schunk suggest that when building self-efficacy it is best to shrink the behavioral tasks that are required (3). For prisoners, this means offering a class room right in their unit. Imagine if a college was built next door, wouldn't you be tempted to at least wonder through it? Ask some questions? Meet the admissions Officer

just to meet your neighbors?

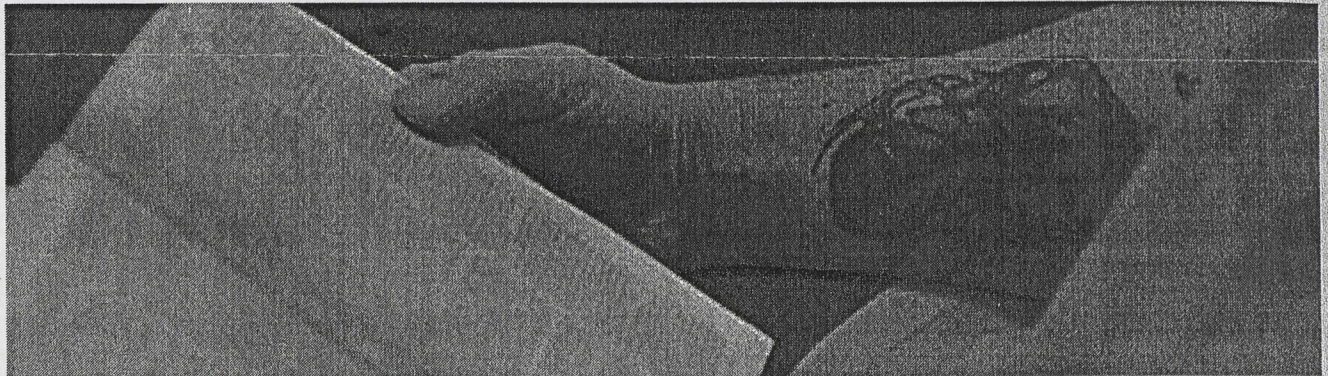
... Oh, look, an interesting course.

Considering that 97% of prisoner in the survey admitted they would voluntary take that tour gives me hope.

As the evaluation is nearing its conclusion plans are being made to improve the program. Informative fliers will be designed that instruct prisoners on applying for vital documents, about preparing themselves for assistance in the Reentry Opportunity Center, and leads on employment and postsecondary education available to them.

Based in part by my 11 year experience inside the BOP, and 4 years' experience as an educator of prisoners, the psychological phenomenon found in U.S. prisons doesn't get a lot of practical attention. What's important is that solutions must be backed up with plenty of psychological studies, and be administered professionally. As straight-forward as our approach is -it is radical. Hopefully another study, in about three to five years, quantifies my greatest hope: a reduction in recidivism among participants.

Darrel, a prisoner included in the survey summed it up pretty good, "The programs are good, they keep your mind working instead of just idling in prison. Thinking and learning is always good." Thanks to participants like him we are now closer to measuring to what extent that good is doing.



Footnotes:

1. Susan Kieffer, Reentry Affairs Coordinator, Ray Brook, NY, schieffer@bop.gov, *see "Essential Reentry Resource Book"
2. David Dunning, Chip Heath, and Jerry Suls (2004), "Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 69-106.
3. Albert Bandura and Dale H. Shunk, (1981), "Cultivating Competence, Self-Efficacy, and Intrinsic Interest Through proximal Self-Motivation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41, 586-598

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