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Practical solutions: An analysis of challenges and obstacles facing today's offenders

The United States has experienced a 400% increase its prison population over the past 24 years (Lynch & Sabol, 2001). Having been so successful on the “get tough on crime” agenda, the public’s attention has now turned to the 600,000 offenders released to our communities each year. During FY 2004, the Missouri Department of Corrections released over 18,000 in Missouri alone (Clements, Johnston, Rollins, & Stringer, 2005). Research indicates over a three year period 7 of 10 released offenders will be rearrested, and over 50% will return to prison (Visher & Travis, 2003). Of all the issues addressed in current reentry policy, little attention has been paid to education as a form of rehabilitation. One hundred and ten male Missouri offenders provided responses on a survey to the often overlooked issue of post-incarceration educational opportunities and challenges. In addition, they were queried about educational attitudes. A Likert scale was created to measure how much respondents thought they would benefit from more education with “1” indicating “no benefit” and “5” indicating “very much benefit”. The mean score for the sample was 4.28 revealing the participants’ awareness of the potential benefits of pursuing an education. Given the choices of “better work history”, “better work skills”, “more education”, or “better people skills” a majority of respondents reported a better education would help them get the job they want most. What participants planned to do educationally was compared to what they would do if given an educational opportunity and participants were asked what funding would be available to them should they decide to pursue more education. The study tested the hypothesis that Missouri offenders are not aware of educational opportunities available. The hypothesis was supported as only 46.8% acknowledged grants and loans could be accessed to fund their education and even fewer could count on family or friends. The respondents wrote many unsolicited comments asking how they could go to college. A discussion follows the results and includes a potential plan to address the offenders’ educational needs. Possible policy implications are also discussed.