

Lessons Learned From 30 Years of Prison Programs

By NIJ Staff

Authors' Note: *Points of view expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Edward Latessa, Ph.D., director of the University of Cincinnati's School of Criminal Justice, has seen the best and the worst of programs in the 30 years that he has been studying what makes offenders stop committing crimes. Latessa and his team have assessed more than 550 correctional programs nationwide ranging from yoga and gardening to boot camps and talk therapy. He is convinced that many treatment programs do not reduce recidivism and that successful treatment programs focus on reducing — rather than just managing — the multiple risk factors of high-risk offenders. Such programs, when well-designed and executed, change offenders' negative behavior and can be 20 to 30 percent more successful in reducing recidivism than other programs.

Latessa spoke at the National Institute of Justice's "Research for the Real World" seminar series. His talk, "Solutions in Corrections: Using Evidence-Based Knowledge,"¹ discussed how to identify unsuccessful programs and how to develop successful ones.

Identifying Unsuccessful Programs

During his address, Latessa discussed many programs (e.g., art, music and dance) that are designed to help offenders deal with stress or occupy their time while in prison. Such programs may create better artists, musicians and dancers, but do not significantly reduce recidivism, he said. Latessa believes that while these programs may help a few offenders change their behavior, they are not programs that teach offenders how to

change negative behavior and avoid committing new crimes when they are released.

Developing Successful Programs

Latessa also discussed the importance of assessing an offender's risk of recidivating. A variety of risk assessment tools are available to help prison officials make decisions about which programs are right for which inmates — both when they are imprisoned and when they are released back into the community.

To change criminal behavior, programs need to focus on the current causes of such behavior — anger, anti-social behavior, negative values, negative self-image and negative attitudes.

The research shows that when offenders are placed in a custody level that matches their precise risks and needs, they are more likely to complete their sentences successfully. In addition, assigning low-risk offenders to intensive programs designed for high-risk offenders may increase reoffending — an ugly side effect of misapplying treatment programs. The wrong treatment can make things worse.

Offenders become high-risk when they have multiple risk factors. According to Latessa, some programs fail to reduce recidivism because they address only one of many risk factors, or they focus on managing the risk instead of changing the behavior. To change criminal behavior, programs need to focus on the current causes of such behavior — anger, anti-social behavior, negative values, negative self-image and negative attitudes.

Latessa noted that cognitive behavioral interventions such as modeling and social learning are the evidence-based methods for addressing offender risk factors. Modeling and social learning, which involve providing offenders with positive role models and teaching them how to behave properly, are proving to be the most effective ways to change behavior. Offenders must have the skills in place to sustain change, which means knowing how to handle challenging events in life, Latessa said. They need coaching and must practice how to behave in stressful situations that address risky areas of their lives. When they are released from prison, they must surround themselves with pro-social (positive) people, such as family members or a boss.

Elements of Effective Corrections Programs

Based on his assessment of many programs, Latessa believes that good leadership, staff training, solid design and assessment procedures, and targeted treatment and delivery contribute to a successful corrections program. A successful program is one with a design that has solid principles and procedures with great integrity (i.e., strict adherence to the requirements of the program) and excellent delivery (i.e., competent and effective trainers and personnel). Research

shows that poorly designed and poorly delivered programs can produce negative effects, Latessa said. For example, the results of two sizeable studies, one on halfway houses in Ohio and the other on residential programs, showed that poorly designed, poorly implemented programs increased recidivism 19 percent, whereas the better-designed and better-implemented programs reduced recidivism by 22 percent.

According to Latessa, one cannot change the events in the offender's past that may have contributed to his

or her path of crime. However, one can help the offender at his or her current stage in life by providing well-designed and implemented programs that reduce multiple risk factors. These programs can equip the offender with life skills that will help him or her change behavior to avoid recidivism.

ENDNOTE

¹ All research results in this article are based on the following presentation: Latessa, Edward. May 13, 2010. Solutions in Corrections: Using Evidence-Based

Knowledge, part of the Research for the Real World seminar series. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice. For more information, visit <http://www.nij.gov/nij/multimedia/presenter/presenter-latessa/data/resources/presenter-latessa-transcript.htm>.

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