



# **Literacy Changes Lives**

## **The role of literacy in offending behaviour**

**A discussion piece**

**Christina Clark and George Dugdale**  
**National Literacy Trust**

**November 2008**

Registered address:  
National Literacy Trust  
68 South Lambeth Road  
London SW8 1RL

☎ 020 7587 1842  
📠 020 7587 1411  
✉ [contact@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:contact@literacytrust.org.uk)  
[www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk)

National Literacy Trust is a registered charity, no. 1116260, and a company limited by guarantee, no. 5836486. Registered in England and Wales. VAT reg no. 919 3158 11.

## Table of contents

The context.....	4
Literacy among prisoners and offenders .....	6
The other side of the story.....	7
Conclusion.....	8
References .....	10

In September 2008, we published a report, *Literacy changes lives*, which showed that literacy has tangible relationships with many aspects of a person's life, not just educational attainment, but also economic well-being, aspirations, family circumstances, physical and mental health as well as civic / cultural participation. Crucially, this report also outlined evidence of the impact on a person's life when literacy levels are improved.

One important area that we did not address in that report was the possible relationship between criminal behaviour and literacy. It is frequently claimed that low literacy is related to unemployment, a lack of aspirations, poor physical and mental health, and / or great deprivation, which can lead to crime. Therefore, it is said that literacy is a key part of any crime prevention strategy.

This paper examines the link between literacy and offending, and briefly outlines the available evidence. The relationships described in this document are not exclusively found in the British context. Rather, they have been replicated in various countries, most notably in the United States, Canada and Australia. The evidence outlined in this document therefore makes no judgement about British or international penal systems and policies.

The outcomes in adult life are often the product of educational and social processes comprising a combination of influences in which literacy plays a part. This is particularly true for offenders. Literacy problems in the prison population are often compounded by a wide range of emotional, learning and/or attentional deficits, including,

*child abuse and neglect, linguistic impoverishment in the childhood home, low verbal ability, uncorrected visual and hearing impairments in childhood, unskilled teaching in the junior school and mistaken conjecture about literacy practice, closed-head injury and substance misuse, low non-verbal ability, childhood hyperactivity-impulsivity and inattention, impairments in empathy and social cognition, current anxiety and depression, and – often as a default and catch-all explanation – developmental dyslexia (Rice and Brooks, 2004: 4).*

The picture that emerges points to the prominence of poor literacy in the profile of disadvantaged adult lives. However, perhaps controversially, this paper cautions about the link between literacy and criminal behaviour being overstated. A multitude of data is available about the benefits of literacy to recidivism, employment rates after prison and other post-prison outcomes. At the same time, numerous studies also show the opposite, namely that literacy education while in prison has had no measurable impact on such post-prison outcomes.

This contradiction is also reflected in prisoner's experiences:

*I'm not interested in literacy. My main interest is inspiring through my work. The idea that if you can get people to spell and add up, they can be better citizens is rubbish. You have to improve self-esteem.*

Caspar Walsh, writer in residence Bridgend Parc Prison.

*A lot of inmates who haven't got reading and writing make up for their inadequacies in other ways like going out thieving. They should be given the abilities to read and write (dispersal NIE in PRT, 2003)*

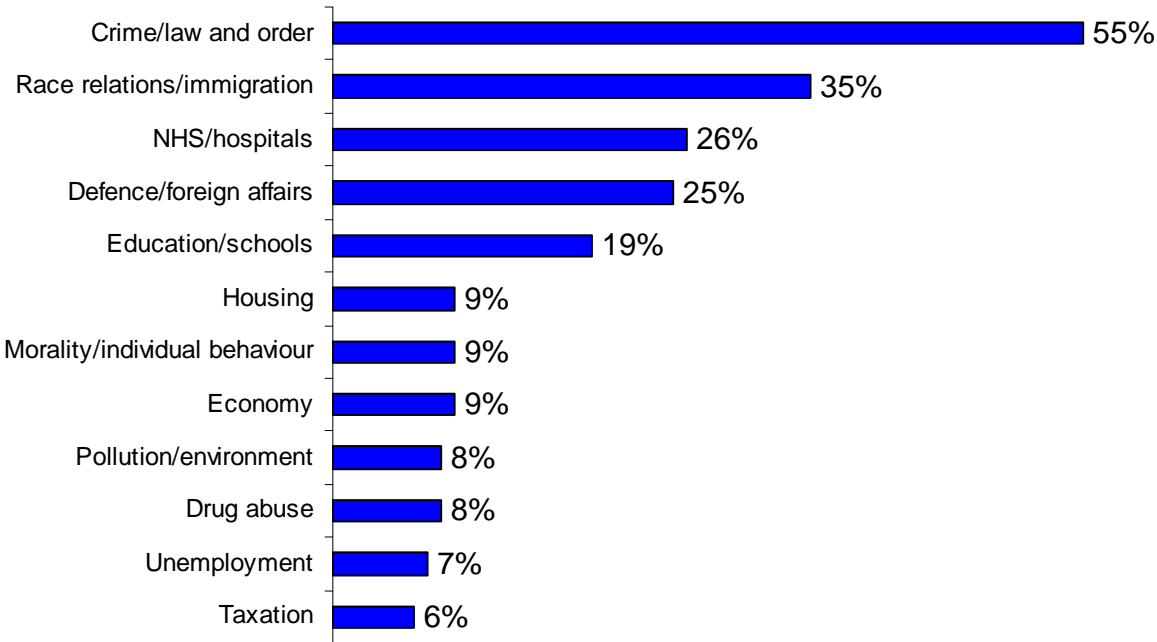
Statistics and research evidence can therefore be used to bolster both sides of the argument. In the absence of any conclusive research, this paper considers if there needs to be conclusive evidence either way, and offers a way forward.

## The context

The prison population in Great Britain is among the highest in Europe, with England and Wales having the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe at 147 per 100,000 of the population (Prison Reform Trust, 2008). At the end of August 2008 there were 13,787 prisoners being held on remand in all prison establishments in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2008). The overall population in custody<sup>1</sup> at the end of August 2008 was 83,852 (Ministry of Justice, 2008). According to recent research by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2008), the figure is even higher in the US, with 1% of American adults (1 in 99.1) currently spending time in prison.

Not only does Britain have the highest imprisonment rate in Europe, crime/law and order is also frequently identified as one of the most important issues facing the country today (Ipsos Mori, 2008; see **Figure 1**).<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?

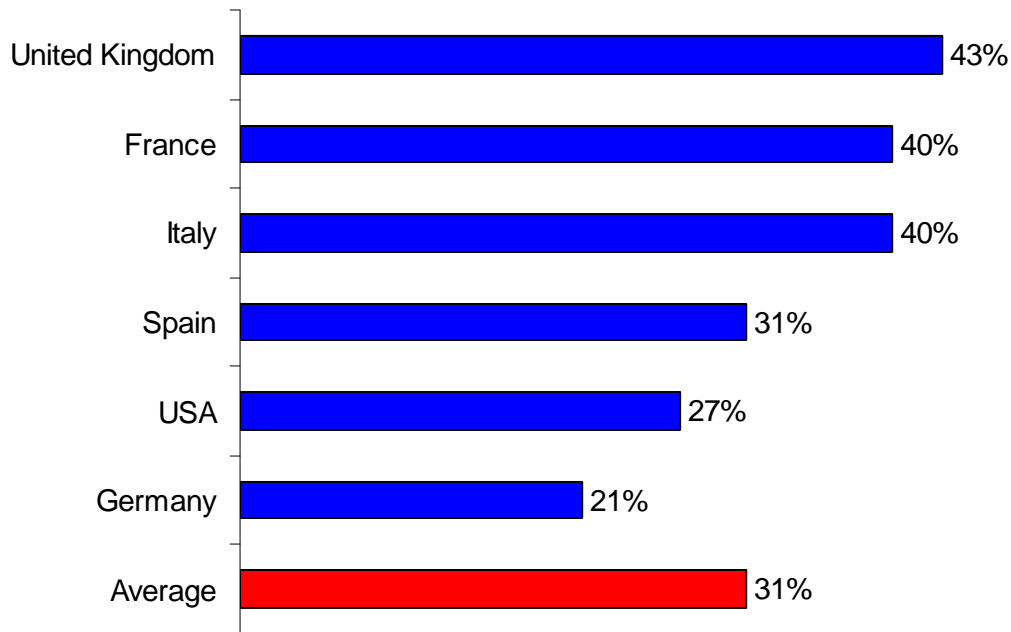


From Ipsos MORI (2008) based on 975 British adults aged 18+

<sup>1</sup> This includes those held in prison establishments, police cells under Operation Safeguard, secure training centres (STCs) and secure children’s homes (SCHs).

<sup>2</sup> Considering the current uncertain economic climate it is perhaps unsurprising that the latest Ipsos Mori figures from October 2008 show that the economy (58%) has overtaken crime/law and order (33%) as the most pressing issue facing Britain today.

Figure 2: % of people who consider crime and violence their biggest concern

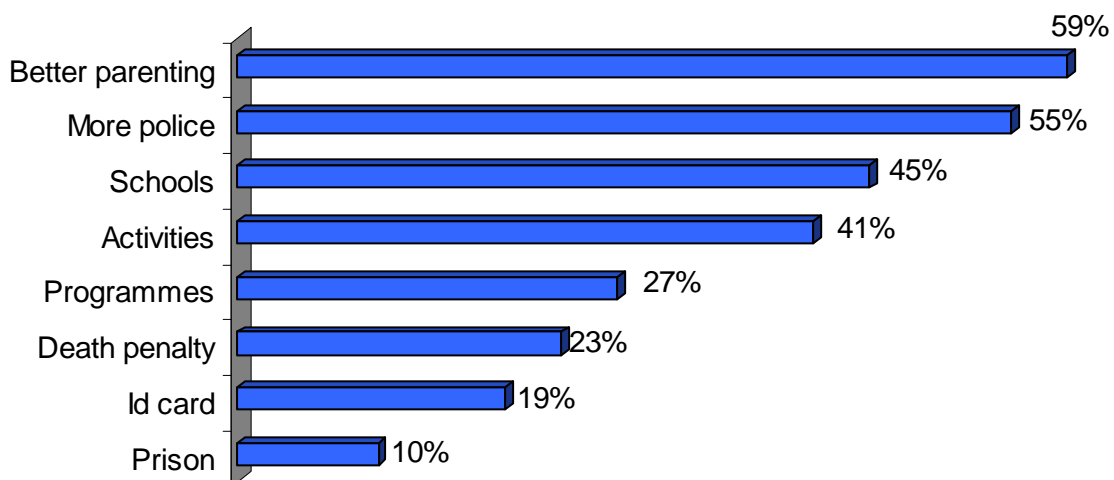


Source: Ipsos MORI International Social Trends Monitor, September 2006 based on circa 1000 interviews in each country

Indeed, international trend surveys show that the British public is more concerned with crime and violence than people from other European countries or the US (see **Figure 2**). Furthermore, it is an issue that individuals say will affect how they will vote in a future election (Ipsos MORI, 2008).

The role of education in criminal behaviour also seems to be firmly entrenched in society. For example, when Mori (2003) explored social attitudes towards crime and crime prevention, it found that alongside better parenting, a larger police force were believed to be among the three best ways to reduce crime (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Which two or three do you think would do most to reduce crime in Britain?



Source: MORI Omnibus Poll 2003

Indeed, education is seen as an important part of dealing with young offenders. Two-thirds of people asked believed that under-18s who have offended and who cannot read, should receive compulsory education rather than custody (Rethinking Crime and Punishment, 2005)

Prisoner numbers, fear of crime, and the drain on public resources mean that prison is a regular topic of conversation among politicians and the public. As the Mori poll above shows, people offer a range of solutions to the problem of criminality and education is a popular choice. However, what is the evidence for such a link? This issue will be explored in the following two sections.

## Literacy among prisoners and offenders

In the UK, the Every Child A Reader programme makes it unequivocally clear that basic literacy is essential to future success. 70% of pupils permanently excluded from school have difficulties in basic literacy skills. 25% of young offenders are said to have reading skills below those of the average seven-year-old. 60% of the prison population is said to have difficulties in basic literacy skills.

These findings built on existing results from a prison service study, which asks prisoners on reception to take a literacy test devised by the Basic Skills Agency. The test is approximately equivalent to the reading skills expected of 9 to 10-year-olds. The 1998 results showed that 60% had problems with literacy, and 40% had severe literacy problems. Similarly, the Social Exclusion Unit reported that 80% of prisoners have writing skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year-old child; the equivalent figure for reading is 50% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002:6).

The acute shortage of literacy skills amongst prisoners are predictably reflected in qualification levels, with a 2005 DFES study revealing that 52% of male prisoners and 71% of female prisoners have no qualifications at all. A Prison Reform Trust (2008) study suggested 48% of prisoners have a reading level at or below Level 1, while an even greater proportion (65%) have a numeracy level at or below Level 1. In addition, it is perhaps unsurprising that 67% of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of imprisonment.

Only 5.2 million adults (16% of the adult population) would fail to pass an English GCSE in autumn 2003 - compared with slightly more than 7 million (20% of adult population) indicated in the Moser report in 1999.

Prisoners have poor literacy compared to the general population, and literacy is essential for an individual's success. Therefore, literacy is thought to be linked to criminality and literacy interventions in prisons are frequently seen to be the solution to the problems. This is an oft used common sense argument. However, the reality is more complicated and the relationship between literacy and crime needs to be looked at in a different light.

## The other side of the story

Literacy levels among prisoners are frequently said to be lower than the general population. However, prisoners are not representative of the general population. They tend to be young males from certain socio-economic backgrounds. For example, an Australian report by Wheldall and Watkins (2004b) comments,

*the prison population is not representative of the general population. The prison population is largely comprised of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. If you compared kids from juvenile justice centres with kids from similar backgrounds who have not been in trouble with the law, their literacy levels would probably be very similar.*

An analysis that looks at prisoners and comparable populations outside of prisons would therefore provide a more accurate picture. Such analyses have shown that prisoners do not necessarily have lower literacy than the populations from which they are drawn. Evidence to this effect has been found within the UK and internationally.

For example, an Australian study found that most young offenders are at least functionally literate and are probably no worse than their non-offending peers from similar socio-economic backgrounds (Wheldall and Watkins, 2004a). Other international evidence elaborating the same point includes findings from Sweden, which showed that prison inmates in Sweden possess reading and writing skills that are comparable to those found in an adult population and that the occurrence of dyslexic problems is very close to population incidences (Samuelsson, Herkner and Lundberg, 2003).

In the UK, the Prison Reading Survey (Rice, Howes and Connell, 1998) found little support for the belief that prisoners are less literate than their counterparts in the general population. The percentages of people with adequate reading comprehension ability in the prison population either match or exceed those in the general population. Below the level of adequacy, the greater number of prisoners with little or no ability to comprehend the simplest texts corresponds to the social class composition of the prison population. Between 5% and 10% could be placed at the lowest level and a further 35% at an intermediate level of competence. Between 30% and 60% can cope efficiently with everyday reading tasks.

Similarly, there is some indication that another frequently cited link, namely between unemployment and offending, is not a simple one either (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2004; for an overview of the relationship between re-entry and work opportunities in the US see Freeman, 2003). According to Hurry and colleagues (2006: 13), there are various possible explanations why there might be a link between unemployment and crime:

- *Lack of legitimate means of getting money may lead to crime.*
- *Unemployment may lead to boredom which may lead to involvement in drugs or fights.*
- *Employment may encourage social integration and therefore act as a protective factor.*
- *Being unemployed and offending may be associated with similar risk factors, such as problems with anger management, living in a poor community where unemployment and crime are high, having problems with drugs, etc.*
- *Having a criminal record may cause unemployment.*



In their review of the effectiveness of employment interventions, Hurry and colleagues (2006: 63), concluded that,

*There is fairly unequivocal evidence that interventions do make a difference to the employment rates of offenders. This evidence is stronger than for intervention effects on recidivism, reported in a number of reviews. This is likely to be because in looking at employment as an outcome, one is looking at a more straightforward chain of cause and effect than is the case with recidivism.*

The evidence suggests that offending behaviour is the result of a myriad of factors that set individuals apart from the society or social grouping they are drawn from. The issue of prisoners and crime has always attracted a tendency to hold up a single issue as the cause and therefore solution to the problem. Indeed, the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005, paragraph 47) cautioned that “the heavy concentration on basic skills qualifications is based on little more than a hunch”. Any rigorous research that addresses this knowledge gap is still outstanding.

## Conclusion

So, there is no conclusive evidence on whether prisoners do or do not have literacy skills that are worse than those of the general population. But the question arises: Does it matter? We know that a proportion of prisoners struggle with their reading and writing. They might not struggle more than their peers on the outside but they may be more easily reached by interventions to increase those skills than their peers on the outside.

Vic Pomeroy (2003) argued that,

*The Prison Service has to prove to the public that providing education and skills programmes will succeed in turning the majority of offenders away from crime. If not, this strategy may be viewed as simply filling our prisons with more educated offenders.*

However, increasing literacy skills might be justified by something more basic than the impact on post-prison outcomes. Instead, they may be the

*potential for restoring to society those people who are excluded from full citizenship because they have yet to attain functional literacy. In short, reading interventions for offenders are justified not by reference to human wrongs but by reference to human rights (Rice and Brooks, 2004: 2).*

But we should remember that people end up in prison for a variety of reasons and present a multitude of problems, including drug abuse, anger issues, debt, relationship issues, homelessness or other housing issues, mental health issues, unemployment and a mentality of low aspirations.

We do not believe that improving literacy skills will magically reduce or even prevent offending. While there are certainly individuals who would testify to the power of literacy in changing their lives and putting them back on to the straight and narrow, most would



look at such statements with a degree of cynicism. Instead, a lack of literacy skills will only ever be part of a greater deficit. Multiple factors will therefore need to be addressed to make a sustained change in the lives of prisoners.

Literacy should not be held up as a panacea for crime prevention and reduction. It would be more productive to recognise literacy as one of a range of tools that should be implemented to effectively rehabilitate. Help needs to be multi-agency, collaborative and strategic. There are a myriad of factors that result in an individual being imprisoned and unless a holistic approach that tackles all these factors is used then a true difference cannot be made. However, public sector agencies, such as housing and health do not necessarily see offenders or ex-offenders as a priority group.

The evidence also points to a reaffirmation of the serious literacy needs of certain sections of the UK population. If many prisoners have severe literacy needs but they do not have worse needs than the populations they're drawn from, then there is still a serious issue around the literacy of certain sections of the UK. It has often been noted that societal problems are discovered and confirmed through studies into prisoners. As early as 1913 Charles Goring (p.267) commented:

*Many dogmatic assertions that poverty, illiteracy, irreligion, parental neglect, etc, etc, are causes of crime have resulted from the fact that the general prevalency of these conditions ... has been realised for the first time when studying criminals; and has accordingly been regarded as peculiar to the personal histories of these individuals only.*

Analysis of the literacy rates of prisoners should take this into account and it should not be forgotten that if prisoners represent of a section of society, it is a section with acute and often ignored needs.

The reality, therefore, is that crime is the result of a number of factors, and any intervention needs to take account of this and be realistic in its aims. To cement any literacy work in prisons, we propose the following further actions.

### **Further actions**

- investigate the opportunities that exist to liaise with a wide range of agencies, such as health and housing, to make a sustained impact
- explore prison-specific issues that might impact on literacy and other interventions. For example, research by the Citizen's Advice Bureau (2007) showed that logistics problems of frequent transferrals and short sentences may preclude prisoners from signing up or completing courses. More specifically, they found that the prisoners they interviewed had been moved on average four times. Prison staff attitudes towards education are also likely to have an impact.
- the prison population is diverse. Therefore, the ingredients that work most effectively with different segments of the prison population need to be explored.
- the potential to offer formal accreditation for participating in literacy projects in prisons needs to be investigated.
- Closer link-up between education in prisons and prison libraries.

These areas will be addressed in the second part of this study, which will be undertaken in 2009, and will explore what interventions, with a literacy dimension, have been found to be successful and to what degree the effectiveness of any intervention is predicated on multi-agency working.

### Useful prison sites:

Shannon Trust: [www.shannontrust.org.uk/index.asp](http://www.shannontrust.org.uk/index.asp). The Shannon Trust runs the Toe by Toe Reading Plan, an award-winning peer mentoring programme, which encourages and supports prisoners who can read to give one-to-one tuition to prisoners who struggle to read

The Pew Charitable Trusts (2008). *One in 100: Behind bars in America 2008*. Accessed 01/03/2008 at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/).

Prison Reform Trust: [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/).

DIUS: Offenders learning and skills  
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/offenderlearning/index.cfm?flash=1>

## References

DFES (2005). *Reducing re-offending through skills and employment: Next steps*. London: DFES

Freeman, R. (2003). *Can we close the revolving door? Recidivism vs. Employment of Ex-Offenders in the U.S.* Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

HM Inspectorate of Probation (2004). *An Inspection of the delivery of Employment and Basic Skills (EBS) with offenders by the National Probation Service*. London: HM Inspectorate of Probation.

House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005). *Prison education: Seventh report of session 2004 – 2005, Vol I*. London: HMSO.

Hurry, J., Brazier, L., Parker, M. and Wilson, A. (2006). *Rapid evidence assessment of interventions that promote employment for offenders*. London: DfES.

Goring, C. (1913). *The English Convict. A statistical study*. London: HMSO.

Ipsos Mori (2008). *Political Monitor May 2008*. London: Ipsos Mori.

Ministry of Justice (2008). *Population in custody monthly tables August 2008 England and Wales*. Accessed 14/10/2008 at [www.justice.gov.uk/docs/population-in-custody-august08.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/population-in-custody-august08.pdf)

Mori (2003). *Attitudes to crime and prisons 2003*. Accessed June 2008 at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/polls-03/attitudes-to-crime-prisons-2003.ashx>.

The Pew Charitable Trusts (2008). *One in 100: Behind bars in America 2008*. Accessed 01/03/2008 at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/).

Pomeroy, V. (2003). From prison education to educating prisoners. Accessed on 10 Oct 2008 at [www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/tutors/expertcolumn/prisons/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/tutors/expertcolumn/prisons/)

The Prison Reform Trust (2008). *June 2008 Factfile*. London: Prison Reform Trust.

Rethinking Crime and Punishment (2005). *Unlocking learning*. Accessed May 2008 at <http://www.rethinking.org.uk/informed/Unlocking%20learning.pdf>.

Rice, M., & Brooks, G. (2004). *Developmental Dyslexia in Adults: a research review*. London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy.

Rice, M., Howes, M. and Connell, P. (1998). *The Prison Reading Survey: A report to HM Prison Service Planning Group*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Social Exclusion Unit (2002). *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. London: Social Exclusion Unit.

Samuelsson, Herkner and Lundberg (2003). Reading and Writing Difficulties Among Prison Inmates: A Matter of Experiential Factors Rather Than Dyslexic Problems. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, Volume 7, Issue 1 January 2003 , pages 53 – 73.

Wheldall, K. and Watkins, R. (2004a). Literacy levels of male juvenile justice detainees. *Educational Review*, **53**, 3-11.

Wheldall, K. and Watkins, R. (2004b) cited in [http://www.postgradandbeyond.mq.edu.au/enewsletter/05-education/issue\\_9\\_stories/story2.htm](http://www.postgradandbeyond.mq.edu.au/enewsletter/05-education/issue_9_stories/story2.htm)