



# National Institute of Justice *Update*

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## Researchers Evaluate Eight Shock Incarceration Programs

In recent years, a number of jurisdictions have implemented shock incarceration (boot camp) programs in an effort to alleviate prison crowding and reduce recidivism. In 1984, just 2 States operated such programs; by 1992, just 8 years later, half the States, plus the Federal Bureau of Prisons, were operating 41 programs, with several other States about to launch programs of their own.

To find out how shock incarceration programs are operating and which objectives they are achieving, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) sponsored an evaluation of eight adult programs (in Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas). Results of the study are reported in *Multisite Evaluation of Shock Incarceration*, an NIJ Evaluation Report. In addition to studying effects on recidivism and prison crowding, the evaluation examined the development and implementation of the programs, the attitude changes of offenders during the in-prison phase of the programs, and the impact of the programs on the positive activities of graduates during community supervision.

In all eight programs, offenders participated in a rigorous daily schedule of military drill and ceremony, physical training, and hard labor. Program length ranged from 90 to 180 days. Program participants were generally young males convicted of nonviolent offenses who did not have an extensive criminal history. Beyond this common core, programs varied on characteristics hypothesized to affect the ability of the program to achieve stated correctional goals. For example, programs differed in the type of therapeutic programming adopted as well as the hours per day devoted to such programming. They also varied in size, location (whether located within a larger prison or in a separate facility), intensity of release supervision, and type of aftercare during community supervision.

### Impact on recidivism

Recidivism rates of those who successfully completed the shock incarceration program were generally similar to those of comparable offenders who spent a longer time in prison. The lower recidivism rates of some boot camps appeared to result from the process of selecting offenders for the program or from the intensive supervision given after graduation.

In five States (Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina), the boot camp experience did not reduce recidivism. In the other three States (New York, Illinois, Louisiana) boot camp graduates had lower rates on one measure of recidivism. Given that all shock incarceration programs are modeled after military boot camps with strict rules and discipline, physical training and hard labor, the different results suggest that the boot camp experience in itself does not successfully reduce recidivism.

Programs in the States that experienced lower recidivism had some similarities. The in-prison phase was followed by a 6-month intensive supervision phase in the community. Each program had a strong focus on rehabilitation, voluntary participation, selection from prison-bound entrants, and longer program duration. Each had a high dropout rate. Any or all of these aspects of the programs could have had an impact on offenders with or without the boot camp atmosphere.

### Impact on prison crowding

The major factor influencing prison bed savings was whether the boot camp program targeted prison-bound offenders. To reduce prison crowding, a sufficient number of prison-bound offenders must successfully complete the

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program serving less time than they would otherwise have served in a conventional prison.

Thus program design was critical to the successful reduction of prison crowding. Programs that empowered the Department of Corrections to select boot camp participants were most likely to alleviate prison crowding because they maximized the probability of selecting offenders who would otherwise have been sentenced to prison. Other factors that affected the ability of boot camp programs to reduce prison crowding included the restrictiveness of eligibility and suitability criteria (stricter criteria divert fewer prison-bound offenders); length of the program (programs that keep participants in boot camp longer are less likely to reduce prison crowding); and size of the program and graduation rates (smaller programs and those that graduate fewer offenders obviously keep fewer offenders out of prison).

### **Attitude changes of offenders during the in-prison phase**

Unlike inmates incarcerated in conventional prisons, boot camp participants believed that their experience had been positive and that they had changed for the better. Inmates reported that positive benefits of shock incarceration were improved physical health (including learning to live without cigarettes and drugs), educational opportunities, and personal safety. These effects were greater for offenders in boot camps that were voluntary or provided more time for therapeutic activities.

### **Impact on graduates during community supervision**

Boot camp graduates did as well in adjusting to community supervision as parolees who had been released from traditional prisons. Only in Florida did boot camp graduates participate in more positive activities than parolees. Performance of both parolees and boot camp graduates declined over time during the first year of community supervision.

The more intensely offenders were supervised in the community (that is, the more contacts they had with correctional officials), the better they adjusted. Supervision intensity may thus be a key factor in coercing offenders to participate in positive activities during community supervision.

The report's findings were obtained through self-report questionnaires and onsite interviews with boot camp inmates, correctional officers, and probation/parole officers.

The complete report of this study, *Multisite Evaluation of Shock Incarceration*, by Doris L. MacKenzie and Claire Souryal, can be obtained free from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850, 800-851-3420. Ask for NCJ # 150062.

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