



RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 121

EVALUATION OF INTENSIVE REGIMES FOR YOUNG OFFENDERS

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Intensive regimes for young offenders were established at Thorn Cross Young Offender Institution in July 1996 and at Colchester Military Corrective Training Centre in February 1997. Their aim was to test the impact of demanding, highly structured regimes on attitudes, behaviour and recidivism. These regimes were evaluated and the main findings are summarised here.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ One year after discharge the Thorn Cross experimental group had a significant drop of about 10% in reconviction rates, compared with those in the control group who showed little change.
- ▶ There was no statistically significant difference between the reconviction rates of the two Colchester groups, but given the small numbers involved it is difficult to draw conclusions from this.
- ▶ There was little difference between Thorn Cross, Colchester and control group offenders in terms of their 'before and after' performance on a variety of psychological tests. However, the Colchester group had significantly more positive attitudes towards staff and other inmates at the end of sentence and were significantly more hopeful about the future than the control group.
- ▶ A number of small follow-up studies provide some evidence that the Colchester regime was successful in giving offenders a degree of self-confidence. This, in turn, seems to have given them a slight edge over the control group when it came to finding employment and with post-release experiences in general.
- ▶ The success of the Thorn Cross regime in reducing reconvictions is probably due to its offending behaviour, education, mentoring and throughcare components rather than to its drilling and physical training components. The Colchester regime, which emphasised physical activities, was not successful in reducing reconvictions.

The Prison Service was asked in 1994 to design a new regime for young offenders. This followed a period of intense public debate regarding the treatment of young offenders, stimulated by a number of events. The main focus was to be a reduction in offending behaviour. The ethos was one of 'discipline', 'hard work' and 'earned privileges'. Regimes were also to incorporate the best elements of the American 'Boot Camp' programmes. The 'Boot Camps' showed that the more successful programmes were those which supported their physically challenging and highly disciplined regimes with well developed education/training programmes and programmes addressing offending behaviour. Two regimes were

designed – the Thorn Cross Young Offender Institution opened in July 1996 and the Colchester Military Corrective Training Centre opened in February 1997.

THORN CROSS YOUNG OFFENDER INSTITUTION

The 'High Intensity Training' or 'HIT' regime at Thorn Cross Young Offender Institution (YOI) was designed around interventions and activities that research had shown to be effective in reducing recidivism. It offers a highly structured 16-hour programme of activities each day that are physically challenging and which address offending behaviour. Particular emphasis is given to the throughcare element and whenever possible an offender is provided with a work or

training placement on release. It is a 25-week programme with five periods of five weeks, each based around a specific theme aimed at reducing each offender's risk of reoffending. A maximum of 14 young offenders are recruited onto the programme every five weeks. The themes are as follows:

Initial assessment

The educational, physical, personal and offending behaviour needs of each young offender entering the programme are assessed.

Basic skills

This concentrates on classroom activity. Young offenders begin to work towards nationally recognised educational qualifications, commence a programme of basic life and social skills and undertake the Enhanced Thinking Skills course.

Vocational training

This period is based around vocational training courses (e.g. painting and decorating, welding). Courses are matched as closely as possible to the type of work placement the offender will undertake in the final phase.

Pre-release issues

The offenders complete any outstanding education work, engage in life and social skills training relevant to life outside prison and undertake a further programme of groupwork aimed at reducing reoffending following release.

Community placement

The last period is a work or training placement in the community. Offenders are released on temporary licence on a Monday and return to the HIT Centre on a Friday. During this placement they receive support from their personal officers and from mentors in the community, selected by the Society of Voluntary Associates.

THE COLCHESTER REGIME

While Thorn Cross was designed to be physically challenging, ministers felt there was still a need for a regime more overtly disciplinarian in nature. The Colchester regime was designed so that suitable young offenders would experience, as closely as possible, the military regime and ethos at the Military Corrective Training Centre (MCTC) at Colchester. The Prison Service was asked to look at ways in which it might learn from the skills and expertise developed by the army in dealing with young men.

Following negotiations between the Home Office and Ministry of Defence, the army made a separate building available at Colchester which could accommodate up to 32 young offenders. It was intended that they would not spend all their time in the building but would use MCTC facilities such as the parade ground, classrooms, gymnasium, vocational training workshops, assault course and farm. They would wear army uniforms.

THE EVALUATION

The regimes were evaluated by a team of researchers and prison psychologists led by Professor David Farrington of the Cambridge University Institute of Criminology. Control groups for the two regimes were used, although there were differences between these groups and the 'experimental' groups in the evaluation (see Methodological Note). The evaluation assessed the impact of the regimes on attitudes and behaviour and looked at 12-month reconviction rates.

Staff, who volunteered for the work, were drawn from both the MCTC and the Prison Service. The Commandant of the MCTC was appointed as the governor of the YOI. The deputy governor was a Prison Service appointee.

The regime had three stages, progression depending on good behaviour and conformity to the regime.

Stage 1 (about 6 weeks)

Stage 1 was austere. Offenders:

- had no access to television or a telephone
- were escorted wherever they went
- were locked in their rooms at night at 8.00pm
- had a great deal of marching, drilling and physical training, rigorous room and kit inspections
- had literacy and numeracy education.

Stage 2 (about 8 weeks)

Offenders:

- were no longer locked up in their rooms at night
- had access to a radio and a television
- were still escorted around the site
- continued with drilling and physical training
- had vocational training (e.g. painting and decorating, bricklaying)
- had career counselling (e.g. making job applications, money management).

Stage 3 (about 12 weeks)

Offenders:

- had access to colour television and a telephone
- were trusted to make their own way round the site, could work on the farm
- could leave the site on community and conservation projects.

The Colchester YOI closed in March 1998 – it had selected and dealt with 66 young offenders.

SELECTION TO THE TWO REGIMES

Criteria for selection was largely the same for both regimes. Offenders were eligible if they:

- were male
- were aged 18 to 21 years
- had about six months left to serve
- were suitable for open conditions (e.g. no previous escape or sex offences)
- were able mentally and physically to cope with the regime.

Selection was along similar lines for both regimes. Teams visited each of the 'feeder' establishments (predominantly Hindley, Lancaster Farms, Stoke Heath and Brinsford for Thorn Cross and Dover, Onley, Rochester and Hollesley Bay for Colchester). They interviewed selected candidates, checked records and, for Thorn Cross, administered psychological tests. Offenders who did not wish to go to the intensive regimes were not selected.

The primary consideration was risk to the public and any young offender who was likely to be dangerous if he absconded was not selected. In practice, however, the selection criteria of sentence length and suitability for open conditions were somewhat incompatible and few selected young offenders were totally suitable for open conditions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION

A common core of psychological tests was used to assess the impact of the regimes on offenders' attitudes and behaviour. Tests were made at the beginning and again at the end of the custodial period in order to gauge the degree of change in these factors:

- control of emotion and aggression
- ability to think before acting
- attitudes to staff and inmates
- antisocial behaviour
- thinking styles relevant to criminal behaviour.

In addition, offenders at Colchester were given a specially designed Attitude Survey.

There was little difference between the Colchester inmates and the control group but the former tended to have noticeably more positive attitudes towards staff and other inmates. On the Attitude survey, Colchester inmates were less unhappy or depressed, more hopeful about the future, and felt more physically fit and in good health than the control group. At Thorn Cross there were no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in their 'before and after' performance on the psychological tests.

12-MONTH RECONVICTION RATES

Reconviction rates of both groups were compared with their 'expected' rates as well as with each other, since despite efforts to match experimental and control groups (see Methodological Note), the match was not fully satisfactory. In essence, experimental and control offenders were not so much compared with each other but with how they were predicted to behave following release.

Data on convictions following discharge from custody taken from the Police National Computer (PNC) were only recognised as genuine reconvictions if the recorded offence date was after the date of discharge from custody. This avoided the inclusion of 'pseudo-reconvictions' i.e. reconvictions for offences committed before their current term of custody.

Data on the criminal histories of the offenders was extracted from the Home Office Offenders Index (OI) and was used to predict their expected reconviction rates in the 12-months following discharge. As the OI data contains pseudo-reconvictions, the rates predicted from it are likely to be slightly higher than the actual rates derived from the PNC. This applies to both experimental and control groups.

Thorn Cross 12-month reconviction rates

Offenders from the first 15 intakes (July 1996–December 1997) were followed up for a period of one year after discharge. Their reconviction rates were compared with those of the control group. For both groups, actual and predicted rates were compared in the way described above.

Table 1 shows that at the one-year mark the experimental group were doing better (they showed a significant drop in reconviction rates) than the control group, who showed little change.

Table 1 Thorn Cross – predicted and actual 12-month reconviction rates

	Number	Actual rate	Predicted rate
Total			
Experimental group	177	35%	47%
Control group	127	55%	56%

As the predicted rate is slightly inflated because it contains 'pseudo reconvictions', the 12% difference between the actual and predicted rates for young offenders who experienced the HIT regime was adjusted. This suggests that they did about 10% better than expected.

Colchester 12-month reconviction rates

Table 2 shows the 12-month actual and predicted reconviction rates of the 61 experimental and 97 control group offenders who were followed up at the 12-month point after discharge.

Again, as at Thorn Cross, the experimental and control groups had slightly different predicted rates of reconviction (though in this case not significantly so). The control group was slightly more criminal than the experimental group, which may have reflected a degree of caution in the selection process.

Table 2 Colchester – predicted and actual 12-month reconviction rates

	Number	Actual rate	Predicted rate
Total			
Experimental group	61	30%	33%
Control group	97	31%	37%

As expected (due to pseudo-reconvictions) both the control and experimental groups beat their predicted rates. There was no statistically significant difference

between the reconviction rates of the two groups, but given the small number of offenders involved it is probably unwise to ascribe too much importance to this finding.

ADDITIONAL STUDIES AT COLCHESTER

The research at Colchester included a number of more qualitative studies such as an assessment of the regime by the chief researcher, staff surveys, post-release interviews with samples of inmates, probation officers and parents. Taken together, the additional studies suggest that:

- Colchester benefited from a good environment and good resources and achieved its main objectives of providing a full and demanding daily programme, with PT and sport as major components of this. Educational opportunities were limited.
- Comparison of staff cultures suggests that the military staff performed well and were successful in establishing a constructive regime. In particular, the military staff seemed to have been successful in providing good role models and fostering good relationships with the offenders. Colchester prison officers were more positive about the regime than officers in other YOIs, and more optimistic about the rehabilitative effects of the regime.

- The regime seems to have given offenders a degree of self-confidence which they probably would not have otherwise achieved. In turn, this seems to have given them (in comparison with the control group) a slight edge when it came to finding and maintaining employment and post-release experiences in general.

CONCLUSIONS

The HIT regime at Thorn Cross seems to have been successful in significantly reducing reconvictions in the first year following release. Data for the second year is not yet complete but preliminary findings suggest that the improvement will not continue to be so clear-cut. Even so, a significant amount of reoffending seems to have been avoided.

A fundamental difficulty in determining the reasons for this success is that the HIT regime is (as its name suggests) an intensive programme and pays as much attention to the throughcare and resettlement elements of a sentence as to its offending behaviour and education elements. All of these may be important in reducing reoffending and it would be unwise to ascribe the success of the regime to any one element – or even group of elements. Nevertheless, the fact that the Colchester regime had no significant effect on reconviction suggests that the drilling and physical training elements of the HIT regime were not crucial to its success.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The control group at Thorn Cross was drawn from those who were eligible according to the selection criteria but were not selected. This was usually because they were considered to lack motivation for the HIT programme or because their behaviour in their current YOI suggested that they were not suitable. This meant that there were differences between the two groups in terms of their criminal history. The control group tended to be more 'criminogenic'. In essence, experimental and control offenders were not so much compared with each other but with how they were predicted to behave following release.

At Colchester, efforts were made to assign eligible offenders at random to either the experimental group or a control group of offenders who remained in other YOIs. Exceptions had to be made and probably the main criterion for allocating to one or the other was the distance of Colchester from the young offender's home (because of visiting problems) and the need to allow a number of YOIs to complete educational courses that they had started. The prediction scores showed that the two groups were quite comparable.

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