IS LESS BETTER?:
Boot Camp, Regular Probation and Rearrest in North Carolina

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ABSTRACT: Using official data, 331 boot camp participants and a stratified random sample of 369 regular probationers were tracked for rearrests over a three-year period. Chi-square tests and logistic regression analysis indicate that participation in boot camp was significantly associated with rearrest for drug offenses, offenses categorized as "other," and all types of offenses combined. Contrary to most prior research, which suggests that boot camp participation has no effect on subsequent criminal behavior, the results in this study indicate that participation in the boot camp program had a detrimental effect on its participants.

Perhaps no other intermediate sanction or prison alternative has captured more attention from the public or policy makers than the boot camp prison. Its combination of punitiveness, visual appeal, and, in the view of some, rehabilitative value seems to offer everything to everyone frustrated with crime committed by young adults, especially males. The idea underlying boot camps is based on simple common sense: give a young rebel a sound three or four month-long thrashing and some firm discipline and that youth will see the evil of his/her way, become an adult, and sin no more. However, common sense can be nonsense (Walker, 1994), and common sense and intuition do not always comport with empirical reality.

In this study, recidivism statistics were compared for 331 participants in North Carolina's boot camp program and a stratified random sample of 369 regular probationers. All 700 individuals were placed on probation or released from boot camp during fiscal year 1992-1993 (between July 1, 1992 and June 30, 1993).

This paper was part of a larger study conducted for the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. The study was mandated by the North Carolina General Assembly, whose legislation spelled out the

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working definition of recidivism as rearrest after the start of probation or exit from boot camp.

The word "recidivism" can be defined many ways, and any definition is problematic. Rogers and Jolin (1989) stated that there has never been a universally accepted definition of the term. For instance, the definition used in this study — fingerprinted rearrest within two years or more — does not include the following: 1) crimes committed but not reported to law enforcement, 2) crimes reported to law enforcement that did not result in an arrest, 3) crimes committed in other states, unless the crime resulted in extradition from North Carolina to that state, 4) crimes other than those requiring fingerprinting, and 5) crimes that should have been fingerprinted and reported to the State Bureau of Investigation's Division of Criminal Information (DCI) by local law enforcement agencies but were not. Everyone arrested for felonies in North Carolina must be fingerprinted and those prints must be sent to the State Bureau of Investigation's DCI. Generally, those arrested for traffic offenses, except serious offenses such as hit and run, and driving while impaired, are not fingerprinted, and most of those that are fingerprinted are not submitted to the DCI. Such a definition of recidivism also assumes that each fingerprinted arrestee is guilty of the offense with which he or she has been charged, which is not always true.

In terms of recidivism, the success of a program depends in large measure on how recidivism is operationalized. Geerken and Hayes (1993) conducted a literature review of probation and parole recidivism studies. Citing 19 different studies, they found that the recidivism rate ranged from 16%-65%, depending to some degree on the definition of recidivism employed for the study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Regular Probation**

Regular probation is the bulwark of the American correctional system. Most individuals under sentence for a criminal offense are under regular probation supervision. It provides basic community supervision to offenders receiving a non-incarcerative sentence from a court. In North Carolina, the degree to which regular probationers are supervised varies from one contact every 15 days to a collateral contact every 90 days. Most are supervised at a restriction level somewhere between those two extremes.

Regular probation has been under fire by those who say it is ineffective, that officers are overburdened with large caseloads, and that conditions of probation are often not enforced. A particularly unflattering view of regular probation was presented by RAND Corp. (Peter-