





Literacy and Justice

Without literacy there can be no justice. (Burt Galaway, John Howard Society, 1997.)

 **Offenders have significantly lower literacy skills than the general population.** As many as 75% of Canadian inmates have low literacy skills. Thirty-six percent of offenders have not completed grade nine. According to the Correctional Service of Canada, the average education level of newly admitted offenders, serving two years or more, is grade seven. These realities can contribute to a person's chances of incarceration in the first place. Without addressing the root causes, the possibility of rehabilitation is also seriously hindered.

 **Literacy is crucial to ensuring equal access to justice.** Accused persons, witnesses and victims with low literacy skills may not have equal access to justice. The text and process surrounding the legal system from arrest to sentencing can be complex and alienating to anyone and especially to those who have low literacy skills. Literacy barriers can affect both the process and the outcome, often discriminating against those who are less literate. Court efficiency and effectiveness are reduced when literacy issues are not recognized and addressed.

 **Literacy training and adult basic education in prisons.** Studies show that prisoners who participate in prison-based education are less likely to re-offend. Every dollar allocated to vocational and basic education programs for offenders yields a 200-300% return on investment. Prison literacy and education programs help to provide inmates with a second chance.

 **Investing in literacy is an effective crime prevention strategy.** Early prevention strategies that include literacy can help to reduce risk factors such as poverty, unemployment and isolation that can lead to crime. Early literacy and family literacy programs are an integral part of any crime prevention and safer community strategy.

What can be done?




- Support and fund prison-based education programs to ensure incarcerated individuals are able to attain a grade 12 equivalent.
- Develop partnerships among justice advocates, legal professionals, literacy organizations and government departments to research literacy levels and needs, and create appropriate initiatives.
- Ensure that families and youth “at-risk,” especially children in the custody of the state, are provided with interventions such as early literacy and remedial schooling.
- Provide consistent and accessible supports to children, families, and adults who have


learning disabilities.

- Promote plain language in the legal process to ensure fair and effective functioning of the courts.

Provide assessment and referral to literacy programs especially for the 50% of inmates who serve short prison sentences (40 days or less). Ensure that follow-up and support are available so that they can continue literacy training.

Suggested *Literacy and Criminal Justice* Resources

-  **John Howard Society of Canada (JHSC)** is an organization of provincial and territorial Societies whose goal is to understand and respond to problems of crime and the criminal justice system. Its activities include advocacy, research, community education, coalition-building and resource development. JHSC has done a number of projects related to literacy and crime, resulting in some excellent materials which are available on the website. They produced *Literacy and the Courts: Protecting the Right to Understand* in 1996. Local and provincial John Howard societies have also developed a range of literacy materials and services. Contact Graham Stewart, Executive Director of JHSC. Address: 809 Blackburn Mews, Kingston, ON K7P 2N6. Tel: 613-384-6272 national@johnhoward.ca website at: www.johnhoward.ca.
- ✓ **John Howard Society of BC** is an association of 9 regional societies operating in 15 communities throughout the province. The society offers a wide range of programs and activities for adults and youths involved in conflict with the law. Contact: David Johnson, Executive Director 2675 Bridge Street, Victoria, BC V8T 4Y4. Tel: 250-386-3428, Email: jhs@johnhoward.victoria.bc.ca, Web site: <http://www.johnhoward.bc.ca/>
- ✓ **Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS)** is a federation of autonomous societies that work with, and on behalf of women involved with the justice system, particularly women in conflict with the law. Elizabeth Fry Societies are community-based agencies dedicated to offering services and programs to marginalized women, promoting public understanding of the needs of women in conflict with the law and the need for change in the criminal justice system as it affects women. Like the John Howard Society, CAEFS has done literacy research at the national level, and local E. Fry Societies do a variety of literacy-related work with the users of their services. Contact: 701-151 Slater Street, Ottawa, ON K1P 5H3, tel: 613-238-2422, fax: 613-232-7130 e-mail: caeifs@web.ca, website: www.elizabethfry.ca.
- ✓ **Correctional Services Canada** can be contacted at: tel: 613-992-5891 or www.csc-scc.gc.ca.
- ✓ **Corrections BC** – www.pssg.gov.gc.ca/corrections/index.htm
-  **National Associations Active in Criminal Justice (NAACJ)** is a coalition of 21 national and professional organizations with backgrounds in community living, adult education, and rehabilitation of young and adult offenders. All are involved in developing social responsibility models to help build a safer, healthier and more caring society. Produced an awareness kit called *Between the Lines* (1997). Tel: 613-761-1032 or on-line www.naacj.org
-  **Opening minds behind closed doors: literacy in B.C. corrections: a research report.** Prepared by Audrey M. Thomas for the John Howard Society of British Columbia. 1992

 **Inside out [kit]: a teacher's guide to corrections and conditional release. A test of justice** by Corrections Canada, et al. 1999

 - *indicates an item that is in Literacy BC's collection. Visit the collection on-line at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/catalogue/>*

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