Preparing Incarcerated Parents for Reintegration in Families: An Evaluative Study

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

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By

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of the correctional system, recidivism, or a relapse into crime, has been a problem that has plagued policy makers. Not only is the prison population rapidly expanding, but research has shown that more than two-thirds of inmates will be re-arrested within three years of their release (Gadsden 2003). In light of statistics such as these, the common consensus among researchers is that a great deal of reform is necessary in the corrections system. In recent years, states have begun to implement offender rehabilitation programs, with the objective of equipping offenders with the skills they need to become productive members of society after being released from prison. Increasingly, an emphasis has been placed on reuniting offenders with family members, and on strengthening the relationships between offenders and their families, especially their children. As an example, Ohio has recently established a reentry program with considerable emphasis on the parenting role of fathers. The Children of Incarcerated Parents (CIP) program provides parenting and life skills training and focuses on establishing positive relationships between the offenders, their parenting partners, and their children before the offenders are released.

My research is based on a study conducted by researchers at the Ohio State University in 2005. While this prior study was a process evaluation of the CIP program, the objective of my research is to determine whether certain factors, such as existing parenting skills and a desire to change, had a significant impact on whether or not an offender successfully completed the CIP program. The sample consisted of 24 offenders, 15 of which successfully completed the program and 9 who were terminated from the program before completion. The methodology for this project was twofold. The first step
consisted of analyzing the scores on the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (APQ) and the University of Rhode Island Change Assessment scale (URICA) to determine if there was a correlation between higher test scores and successful completion of the program. Although the scores for the group that completed the program were higher overall, the results were not found to be statistically significant.

The next phase of the research consisted of an analysis of the offenders’ levels of participation in the sessions, and their assessment of what they gained from the program. This was accomplished through analyzing both evaluations conducted by the facilitators and feedback forms completed by the offenders after each session. The objective of the second phase of research was to determine whether the offenders who successfully completed the program were those who the facilitators considered to be active participants, and conversely whether offenders whose assessments were more serious and positive were more likely to be successful.

A comparison of feedback forms for terminated and non-terminated offenders suggest that those who were more actively involved in sessions were more likely to complete the program, and completers were more likely to reference positive gains from their participation. Unfortunately, I am unable to assess whether offenders released from prison successfully reintegrated into their families, and avoided engaging in criminal activity. However, it is encouraging that none of the offenders have returned to prison thus far, but it is too early to draw conclusions based on this fact.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background for the Research

In recent years, many leaders in the field of corrections have come to the conclusion that part of the role of the correctional system should be to prepare offenders to reintegrate into society (Wilkinson, 2001). It has become a common school of thought that rather than simply punishing or incapacitating offenders, it may be more effective in the long run to help them reintegrate into society after they are released from prison. The prison population is rapidly expanding, and research has shown that more than two-thirds of offenders will be re-arrested within three years of their release (Gadsden 2003). Many offenders are parents of minor children (Gadsden 2003). This has resulted in large numbers of children growing up without positive male role models, and then as adults often ending up in prison as well (Travis 2003). In light of this, it is beneficial to use the time in prison to teach offenders life skills and parenting skills, and thus prepare them to reintegrate into society.

As a result of this focus on planning for reentry, offender rehabilitation programs have become much more prevalent. These programs are focused on helping offenders develop the skills that are necessary to become a productive member of society, in the hopes of reducing the likelihood that an offender will fall back into a life of crime. It is common for these programs to be specifically targeted toward a particular type of offender, such as substance abusers, sex offenders, female offenders, and incarcerated parents of small children.

A type of program that is proposed as very beneficial is one that focuses on strengthening relationships between offenders and their families. Religious and family
connections are among the best predictors of successful reentry, and the majority of offenders express the desire to be reunited with their children after release (Gadsden 2003). Educational programs that emphasize parenting skills and teach offenders to build relationships with their children are considered vital because by strengthening family ties they increase the likelihood of successful reintegration into society (Klein 1999).

As a result of findings establishing a connection between parenting skills and reintegration into society, the state of Ohio launched a pilot program in 2003 intending to help build relationships between offenders and their children. The Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CIP) is a multi-faceted program aimed at strengthening family ties between offenders and their parenting partners and children, and teaching offenders the parenting and life skills to assist them in successfully reintegrating into society. The assumptions of the program are that, by equipping offenders to be better parents and to reintegrate successfully into the community, their likelihood of recidivism will be reduced and this will translate into a lower recidivism rate for society over time. The program involves the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services working together with Alvis House (Columbus, OH), Center for Families and Children (Cleveland, OH), and Talbert House (Cincinnati, OH) to implement a program aimed at strengthening the relationship between offenders and their families. The residential aspect of the program is offered at the London, Richland, and Dayton Correctional Institutions. For the purpose of this thesis, my research was completed in Columbus, Ohio, and focused on Alvis House and the London Correctional Institution.
The specific program consists of two phases, one during incarceration and the other after the offender is released. During the institutional phase of the program, the offenders and their parenting partners participate in activities designed to teach them how to interact and spend quality time with their children. Twice a month, the parenting partners are transported to the institution to take part in these programs. While the offender is in prison, the parenting partner is provided with a contact person in the community in order to help her obtain the resources needed to help raise their children.

After the offender is released from prison, the community phase of the program begins. This phase of the program lasts from 3 to 6 months after release and the parenting partners and the children continue to be involved. During this phase of the program, the offenders and parenting partners are taught general life skills, such as financial, health, and job search skills, in addition to parenting skills.

Only a small amount of research has been conducted on whether offender rehabilitation programs, such as CIP, are effective in improving family ties and reducing recidivism. Previous studies have shown that these programs can be beneficial if completed and the lessons applied to life outside of prison. For example, studies have been conducted which indicate that certain predictive factors may play a role in whether or not a participant will be successful in completing a treatment program, but the majority of these are in the context of substance abuse treatment. Researchers have not examined the factors that are related to success in programs that teach parenting skills. My general aim is to determine whether there is any correlation between either higher scores on the psychological tests administered to program participants or their level of participation and successful completion of the Children of Incarcerated Parents offender rehabilitation
program. For the purpose of this research, successful completion of the program is defined as remaining in the program until the end without either being dismissed by the program administrators or voluntarily withdrawing.

Common sense would suggest that participants who are naturally skilled as parents, and who have a genuine desire to succeed in a rehabilitation program, would be the most successful. However, it is difficult to determine whether this is true in real life. I attempt to do so by assessing how the scores on tests designed to evaluate parenting skills are related to successful completion of the CIP program, and reviewing feedback of the sessions given by the offenders to determine why some failed to complete the program, and what offenders describe as their gains (or not) from the program.

As a part of this study, I originally intended to determine whether or not any of the participants in the study recidivated after being released from prison. Unfortunately, not enough time has elapsed for me to evaluate this. As of March 1, 2006, none of the 24 offenders in my sample have been returned to prison. Although this is encouraging, it is much too early of a time frame to draw conclusions about whether or not involvement in the program helped to prevent recidivism.

Because assessing recidivism is not possible, and quantitative analysis with a very small sample cannot provide reliable conclusions, I decided to use additional information in a more qualitative focus. Using feedback forms that were completed by the offenders and the facilitators after each session of the program, I conducted an analysis to see which offenders were actively participating. After each session, the facilitators indicated whether or not each offender had participated actively. Quantitatively, by dividing the number of sessions each offender actively participated in by the number of sessions each
had attended, I found that there was a correlation between lower participation and termination from the program. I also used the feedback forms to assess qualitatively how inmate fathers view their experiences in the CIP program.
CHAPTER 2
Prior Literature on Parenting Programs and Reintegration into Society

Prisoner rehabilitation programs have become a subject of much debate among sociologists in recent decades, and there exists a large body of research on the subject (Petersilia 2003). In recent years, several states have begun incorporating job training, parenting, and community support training into pre-release and released phases of sentencing (Davis 2000). It is generally agreed upon by corrections professionals that these programs are beneficial for offenders, and the majority of scholarly research holds this to be true. Research has shown that some rehabilitation programs are more successful than others (Lowenkamp 2004) and that these programs are helpful to some, but not all offenders (Sproule 2003).

One of the main reasons that chances of returning to prison are so high is that offenders often return to society lacking job skills and education and are completely unequipped to reintegrate (Davis 2000). Conversely, developing marketable skills and family ties are strong indicators that offenders will not return to prison (Davis 2000). Involving family members in pre-release and release phase programs can also have positive results for prisoners, families, institutions, and communities (Hairston 2002).

In recent years, increasing numbers of studies have focused on evaluating programs aimed at improving offender reintegration into the community and reducing recidivism (Seiter 2003). Of the different types of rehabilitative programs that have been studied, vocational and work programs, drug rehabilitation programs, and prison prerelease programs were found to reduce recidivism, while half-way house programs were found to ease the transition between prison and the community (Seiter 2003).
Unfortunately, until recently, very few programs were designed to affect family relations, and existing ones did not pertain to Ohio.

Several previous studies have considered demographic and socioeconomic variables (Travis 2001) and community context factors (Kowalski 2001) as variables that may influence whether or not a rehabilitation program is successful. While some of the research makes reference to offender characteristics as predictors of success in rehabilitation programs (Travis 2003), the characteristics being considered are usually factors such as education level, previous arrests, or peer deviance (Knight 2001). Most of these studies are focused on general recidivism and the broad category of offenders. They do not usually zero in on the interim success of inmate parents in completing programs, reintegrating into families, and avoiding of recidivism. Very few scholarly articles have focused directly on characteristics such as existing parenting skills or a desire to be rehabilitated and become a better parent.

For many offenders, along with reintegration into the community, a great challenge is becoming reintegrated into their families. Incarceration often disrupts positive family ties and replaces them with the routine of prison life, which may increase the chances that the prisoner will remain involved in criminal activities (Austin 2004). Many of those incarcerated are fathers of minor children (Gadsden 2003). This leads to children growing up without positive male role models, and then as adults often ending up in prison as well (Travis 2003). Many parents do not want their children to visit them in prison or are prevented from seeing them by the custodial parents (Hairston 2002). Parental absence has a negative effect on children, and fathers in prison that have bad relationships with their children are more likely to suffer from depression (Davis 2000).
There are many barriers to parental involvement while in prison. Offenders may feel that their children do not need them, or they may not have had strong relationships with their children before being incarcerated and now do not know how to begin improving such relationships (Davis 2000). The complex families that offenders often have can provide a challenge in building strong family ties. Most offenders are not married to the mother of their children and most have fathered children with more than one partner (Hairston 2002). Fathers may view their role as different with different children, and they may regard their children as family, but not the mother if they are not in a relationship with her (Hairston 2002). In addition, the prison system often serves to inadvertently discourage family relationships because of the difficulty of visitation, due to the location of the prison being distant from where the children and other family members live, and costs of travel (Austin 2004).

Despite these difficulties, participation with family members is vital to the rehabilitation process. Evidence points to there being positive results of a strong relationship between incarcerated parents and their children (Hairston 2002). The vast majority of prisoners express the desire to be reunited with their families and children after they are released, and in fact religious and family connections are the best predictors of successful reentry (Gadsden 2003). Educational programs that focus on strengthening relationships between inmates and their families are important because, although strong family ties do not guarantee rehabilitative success, their absence increases the likelihood of failure (Klein 1999). Families provide an anchor to life in the community for the inmates and continued contact with family members while in prison significantly reduces recidivism and improves reintegration into the community (Travis 2003).
The majority of academic research conducted on the subject of prisoner rehabilitation programs has been for the purpose of either determining whether or not a particular program has been effective in preventing recidivism (Lipsey 2001), or evaluating the quality of the program itself. Some empirical research has been conducted on the importance of including family in rehabilitation programs that are designed to reduce recidivism. However, an aspect of rehabilitative programs that has received very little scholarly focus is whether existing offender characteristics relating to parenting skills and willingness to change are predictive of an offender’s success in a program designed to improve their relations with family members. Thus the aim of this research is to contribute empirical information on an issue that has been speculated about but not often directly examined.

It is intuitively understood that most offenders who are parents desire to return to their families and take care of their children after completing their sentences. However, the intensity of this desire varies from one offender to another. The purpose of this research is to determine whether intangible variables, such as existing parenting skills and desire to change, play a role in whether or not an offender successfully completes a rehabilitation program. Further, the research will explore whether there is a relationship between an offender’s level of participation in the program and successful completion.
CHAPTER 3
Methodology

A. Data Collection

The subjects of this research are participants in a CIP program involving the London Correctional Institution and Alvis House. There were 53 participants in the program. The data were collected by obtaining each participant’s file from Alvis House and entering it into a database. Each file contained information on the dates of birth of the offender, parenting partner, and children, as well as what the offender was charged with and the length of the sentence. My analysis is based on data for 24 offenders for whom complete information were available.

Prior to beginning treatment, each participant was given a series of evaluations, which included the two psychological tests used to collect the data for this research paper. *The Alabama Parenting Questionnaire* (APQ) consists of 39 questions and is designed to evaluate each participant on five broad areas: Parental Involvement, Positive Parenting, Poor Monitoring/Supervision, Inconsistent Discipline, and Other Discipline Practices. *The University of Rhode Island Change Assessment* (URICA) consists of 32 questions which evaluates participants on four areas: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Action, and Maintenance, which are then ranked to determine the final score, referred to as Readiness to Change. These were included in each file for my analysis. Additionally, each file included feedback forms from each of the sessions, which allowed the participant to express in his own words what he learned. These data were entered into a database and then analyzed.
B. Data Analysis

As noted, the original sample consisted of 53 participants; however, 20 of these had incomplete information in their files, and I was unable to determine whether another 9 participants had actually been released from prison. These 29 participants were excluded from the research, leaving me with a sample of 24 offenders.

Data for these 24 offenders were then evaluated in light of whether or not the offender was terminated from the program. Specifically, I determined the scores for offenders on the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (APQ) and the University of Rhode Island Change Assessment scale (URICA). On each component of the APQ, and the overall “Readiness to Change” score from the URICA, I compared the results for participants who did (n=15) and did not (n=9) complete the program.

After completing the analysis of the test scores, I then used the feedback forms from each session to determine whether or not each offender was actively participating during the program. On each feedback form, the offender is rated by the facilitator as “Actively Involved,” “Generally Self-Disclosing,” “Minimum Contribution,” or “Did Not Participate.” In order to determine each offender’s level of participation, I divided the number of times the offender was rated as “Actively Involved” by the number of sessions he attended and expressed the result as a percent. I also assessed qualitatively offenders’ own views of what they gained from participation in the CIP program.
CHAPTER 4
Results

For the purpose of analyzing the data, the offenders were divided into two groups: those who successfully completed the program and those who were terminated from the program before completion. Among the 24 offenders in the sample, 15 successfully completed the program and 9 did not. Successful completion was defined as remaining in the program until the end, without either voluntarily withdrawing or being dismissed by the program administrators. The mean scores for each group were compared using SPSS in order to determine whether there was any significant difference between the scores of the two groups. The test used was an independent samples t-test, with an alpha level of 95%.

Table 1 compares the mean score for members of the terminated and non-terminated groups. The individual scores for participants in these respective groups are included as Appendices A and B. (see pages 23 and 24)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>APQ Dimension</th>
<th>Terminated Group</th>
<th>Non-Terminated Group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td>25.11</td>
<td>29.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Parenting</td>
<td>23.00</td>
<td>24.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Monitoring/Supervision</td>
<td>10.67</td>
<td>12.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent Discipline</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>13.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Discipline Practices</td>
<td>11.89</td>
<td>12.40</td>
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</table>

Table 1 - Mean Scores on Components of the APQ for Terminated and Non-Terminated Offenders

The first APQ variable considered was “Parental Involvement,” for which a higher score is desirable. Higher scores imply that the offender possesses more of the
skills necessary for being a good parent. The mean score of the terminated group of 9 was 25.11, and the mean score for the non-terminated group of 15 was 29.33. The next APQ variable was “Positive Parenting,” for which a higher score is also desirable. The mean of the terminated group was 23.00 and the mean for the non-terminated group was 24.67.

The next APQ variables considered were “Poor Monitoring/Supervision” and “Inconsistent Discipline,” for both of which a lower score is desirable. Lower scores indicate that the offender understands the importance of properly supervising children and being consistent in discipline practices. The mean of “Poor Monitoring/Supervision” for the terminated group was 10.67 and the mean for the non-terminated group was 12.60. The mean of “Inconsistent Discipline” for the terminated group was 15.00 and the mean for the non-terminated group was 13.87.

The only variable considered from the URICA was the final score, referred to as “Readiness to Change.” A higher score is desirable for this variable. Higher scores imply that the offender has accepted that it is necessary for him to alter his lifestyle and become a better parent. The mean of the scores for the terminated group was 11.89 and the mean for the non-terminated group was 12.40.

In general, with the exception of the “Poor Monitoring/Supervision” variable on the APQ, the group that successfully completed the program received more favorable scores in every area. After performing Independent Samples T-Tests to compare the means of each of the above variables, it was found that the results are not statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval, for any of the parenting aspects.

I now turn to the second phase of the analysis: assessment of feedback forms from sessions attended by the 24 participants studied. An overall assessment of involvement in
the program was obtained by dividing the number of times an offender was rated as “Actively Involved” by the number of program sessions he attended, and then expressing the results as a percent. No feedback forms were available for two of the offenders, so they were dropped from the sample for this test. This assessment indicated that participants in the terminated group were actively involved in the program 65.58 percent of the time. This compared to a slightly higher mean of 68.80 percent for the group that successfully completed the program. However, these very similar results for the terminated and non-terminated groups may be a bit misleading in that the un-terminated group attended significantly more sessions than the terminated group. Thus, the former had more opportunities to fail. I then determined how many offenders from each group had participated actively less than 75% of the time, and compared the results. Of the 9 remaining in the terminated group, 6 (two-thirds) had participated actively in less than 75% of the sessions they attended. Of the 13 remaining in the non-terminated group, only 5 (38%) had participated actively in less than 75% of the sessions attended.

The results of the feedback forms analysis show a relationship between the number of times an offender was rated by the facilitators as “Actively Involved” and termination from the program. Actively involved participants were less likely to be terminated. It is possible that the offenders who were terminated did not participate actively in the sessions because they were not interested in the subject matter, or did not have a desire to reform and develop a relationship with their children. It is equally possible; however, that the facilitators were judging how involved the offenders were solely by their vocal participation and ignoring other indicators, such as body language and eye contact.
In order to gain further insight into the results of the sessions, I analyzed the feedback forms given to the offenders at the end of each session. The forms ask the offenders to determine what the most important part of the session was and what they learned from it. At the end of the questionnaire they are asked to describe how they can apply the information to their lives.

The answers varied considerably between the offenders, and allowed for some insights into their attitudes and opinions. The majority of the offenders seemed to put at least some effort into answering the questions, and most of the responses appear to be thoughtful and sincere. Nearly every offender made reference to wanting to be a better father and wanting to go home. The majority indicated that they learned a great deal from each session, and the consistency of the answers between the offenders for each session indicates that most clearly grasped the lesson taught in each session. Most of the offenders simply stated what they had learned in the class; however, others made insightful comments that indicated they were taking the subject matter to heart.

Notably, offenders who seemed to put less thought into their answers were in the terminated group. With the exception of two members of the terminated group, the responses for this group were relatively short, often consisting of only a few words per answer. One of the offenders in this group admitted that he “didn’t get much out of the session,” and was being “treated like a kid.” Another offender in this group wrote “don’t know” for several of his responses, and still another made the comment that one of the sessions “was more argument than education.” Clearly, CIP had little meaning for some members of the terminated group.
Two of the offenders in the terminated group did have positive comments about the program. The first stated that he really wanted to be a good father and felt that he was learning from the sessions. The other made the insightful comment that he was gaining the ability to “look back into his life and see what was missing emotionally, and fill that gap in my children’s life.” Hopefully, these viewpoints bode well for the two offenders despite the fact that they did not complete the program.

The responses of the offenders in the non-terminated group also varied a great deal. Overall, the responses for this group seemed to be slightly longer and more thoughtful. One of the offenders in this group initially seemed not to be putting any effort into his answers, and claimed that one of the sessions had been overly negative and that he had not learned anything. Later in the program however, he commented that it had been an “excellent group,” and that he had learned a great deal. Another offender seemed to be giving a good deal of thought to each of his answers and made the comment “I need to get myself together.” The following quotes give a flavor of the types of positive responses made by the individuals in this group:

“It made me think about my oldest daughter, who is not living at home any longer, yet still needs her father and my love, guidance, and attention.”

“It affected me because I’m not able to be with my children and to be a good parent. When I get out, I’m able to go and do the right things for them.”

“I don’t want my kids taken away from me, so I will be aware of things that may cause that.”

“[Today was about] readjusting to life and family upon release from here, and the effect it will have on the ones at home.”

The majority of this group appeared to be giving thoughtful answers, and it appears that they had grasped the subject matter without any difficulty. Most of the comments from this group seem to be sincere. An overwhelming majority of this group
stated that they wished to become better parents and that they wanted to avoid coming back to prison so that they could stay with their families and raise their children. One hopes that this desire translates into reintegration with families and avoidance of involvement in crime.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The offenders in the CIP program who successfully completed the program had consistently better scores than those who were terminated from the program in almost every area of the personality tests. However, the results were not statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval. As it is difficult to obtain conclusive results with a sample size of 24 offenders, I then analyzed the feedback forms from each session to determine each offender’s level of participation in the program. It was found that approximately 39% of those in the terminated group participated actively, versus approximately 67% in the non-terminated group. This indicates that the offenders who were terminated were not as interested in the program, and did not make adequate effort to benefit from it. Some might argue that facilitators may have mistakenly judged offenders as disinterested. However, the size of the difference in findings for the terminated and non-terminated groups suggests that this is unlikely.

A conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that parenting skills that exist prior to entering the program may be less important than an offender's level of participation in the program. While no clear relationship was found between higher scores on the psychological evaluations and successful completion, offenders who were rated more often as “Actively Involved” in the training activities were more likely to complete the program. The implications of this finding are that, if an offender does not appear to be participating actively, it may be necessary for the facilitators to attempt to
determine the reasons behind this, and increase the involvement of the individual so that he too can reap the benefits of participation.

Both the results of the psychological tests and the offenders’ comments on the feedback forms seem to indicate that most strongly desire to be reunited with their families and to become good parents. However, some of the offenders appear to have difficulty fulfilling the requirements of the program. Although nearly all of the offenders in the program indicate that they want to make the effort to become better parents, offenders in the terminated group appear to put less effort into addressing seriously the questions raised in training and/or reports on the feedback forms. It may be the case that, while all of the offenders would like to successfully reintegrate into their families, some simply may not be willing to make the effort to make this a reality. While the majority of the offenders seemed to grasp the concepts being taught in the sessions, some may have found that the program was more work than they had anticipated. The responses on the feedback forms do not seem to indicate that any of the offenders had difficulty comprehending the subject matter, but it does seem that some did not wish to expend effort to learn or explain what they had learned.

For those who appeared to take the program seriously, there are expressions of having benefited from involvement in the program. Notably, they seemed to grasp the subject matter, and to be able to identify areas where they needed to improve, or learned how to think about specific aspects of interactions with their children. Unfortunately, I had no direct way of assessing whether these expressed benefits of the program actually translated into successful reintegration with children/families, or reduced participation in crime. Yet, the fact that such expressions were more prevalent among those who
completed the CIP program than among their counterparts who were terminated causes me to be somewhat optimistic about the prospects of the non-terminated group. I also take as an indicator that this may be the case the fact that a search of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction’s database reveals no current record for any of the non-terminated offenders who participated in the CIP program.
Bibliography:


### APPENDIX A

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Positive Parenting</th>
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*Table 2 - Terminated Group*
### APPENDIX B

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Table 3 - Non-Terminated Group