



Factsheet #4

Literacy and Justice

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

📖 On average, offenders have significantly lower literacy skills than the general population. Offenders experience literacy problems at a rate 3 times that of the general population. They are also 4 times as likely to have learning disabilities. 36% 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. Furthermore, the legal system is undermined when people don't understand it and lose faith in the process.

📖 Literacy training and adult basic education in prisons reduces recidivism. Low literacy is a risk factor for recidivism. Studies show that prisoners who participate in prison-based education are less likely to re-offend. This provides social and economic returns that far outweigh the original investments. Every dollar allocated to vocational and basic education programs for offenders yields a 200-300% return on investment. Prison literacy and education programs provide inmates with a second chance at an honest, healthy and productive life.

📖 Investing in literacy, especially for families and youth at risk, is an effective crime prevention strategy. Early prevention strategies that include literacy, can help reduce the risk factors such as poverty, unemployment, and isolation that can lead to crime.

📖 What can be done?

Support and funding for prison-based education programs to ensure that 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 to respond by creating 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: 771 Montreal Street, Kingston, ON K7K 3J4. Tel: 613-542-7547, fax: 613-542-6824, e-mail national@johnhoward.ca, website at: www.johnhoward.ca.
- ✓ **Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS)** is a federation of autonomous societies which works 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: kpate@web.net, website: www.elizabethfry.ca.
- ✓ **Correctional Services Canada** can be contacted at: tel: 613-992-5891 or www.csc-scc.gc.ca.
- ✓ **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. They also prepared an awareness kit called *Between the Lines*. Tel: 613-761-1032.