

## Distinguishing graduates from dropouts and dismissals: Who fails boot camp?

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### Abstract

This study of 784 inmates in a boot camp in a southern state was designed to determine what elements from life-course theory distinguished between graduates, dropouts, and dismissals from the program in this facility. Multinomial logistic regression analysis showed that several social bonds—such as employment, income, marital status—and personal assets like self-efficacy differentiated graduates from dropouts and dismissals from that program. In contrast, selling drugs, illegal income, and carrying a weapon also were associated with graduation.

Lack of self-control, drug use, and peer association differentiated dropouts from graduates, whereas history of being abused, emotional problems, and suicidal attempts distinguished dismissals from graduates. The implications of these findings for further research and current decision-making are discussed.

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### Introduction

Boot camps were introduced with great fanfare and expectations by correctional administrators, legislators, and media specialists as an answer to many of the looming exigencies resulting from prison-overcrowding and fiscal constraints (MacKenzie, 1990; Parent, 1989). The introduction of these programs was not without controversy: from the outset, critics argued that boot camps were based on military training strategies designed to instill aggression for combat (Welch, 1997). Morash and Rucker (1990) contended that boot camp training reinforced the very attitudes that were associated with the commission of crimes. These programs also were characterized as low-dosage and ill-defined interventions (Benda & Pallone, 2005; Lutze & Brody, 1999; McCorkle, 1995).

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More recent critiques were based on empirical evidence (Benda & Pallone, 2005; Cullen & Gendreau, 2001; MacKenzie & Armstrong, 2004). Some researchers contended that a consensus was emerging in a new era of “evidence-based corrections” that boot camps were siphoning off scarce resources from interventions with demonstrated effectiveness (Cullen & Gendreau, 2001; Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002). In the most comprehensive study to date, MacKenzie, Brame, McDowall, and Souryal (1995) found that while boot camps did not reduce recidivism, programs with more rehabilitation components (e.g., drug treatment, academic education) and programs targeting prison bound offenders did significantly reduce recidivism in comparison to traditional correctional institutions. In a more recent meta-analysis of forty-four independent boot camp/comparison sample contrasts, MacKenzie, Wilson, and Kider (2001) concluded that it was premature to definitely conclude that boot camp programs were ineffective at reducing crime.

They maintained that it was possible that the integration of the boot camp model and therapeutic programming may produce a synergy capable of reducing recidivism.

Empirical questions concerning the effectiveness of boot camp programs may well have been a preoccupation of scholars that had limited if any functional relevance to practitioners, policymakers, and legislators (Cullen, Blevins, Trager, & Gendreau, 2005). Boot camps were marketed with extravagant claims based on ideological and political ideas rather than on empirically established practices (Finckenaue, 2005; Stinchcomb, 2005). Conservatives believed boot camps provided a secure facility where inmates were forced to deal with the harsh consequences of crime, and they would learn self-control through regimented military training and hard labor. Liberals believed the same programs offered education and rehabilitation that provided opportunities for conventional living. Boot camps were sold as the ideal solution to the problem of how to incarcerate a large number of offenders for punishment as well as for rehabilitation (Benda & Pallone, 2005; Parent, 2003).

### **Purpose of the present study**

As long as legislators and decision-makers in the justice system continue to operate boot camps, it behooves researchers to find out who seems to “succeed” and “fail” in these programs. Success and failure can be variously defined depending on the frame of reference. Success was defined as graduation from boot camp, whereas dropping out of and dismissals from the program were considered as failures for purposes of this study. The authors forego the nuanced discussions that can be presented regarding the fact that some people graduate without benefiting from the program and drop out or are dismissed for reasons that were unrelated to some inability to adapt to boot camp (MacKenzie & Armstrong, 2004). The purpose of this study was to simply examine what characteristics of inmates differentiate graduates from dropouts and dismissals from the boot camp program. Dropouts are inmates who choose to leave the boot camp program and serve the remainder of their sentence in prison, whereas dismissals are persons who are removed from the program because of infractions. Knowing characteristics that distinguish between graduates, dropouts, and dismissals is useful to decisions about admission criteria as well as program design. For example, if drug offenders comprise a disproportionate number of dropouts, serious questions should

be raised about whether boot camps are viable interventions for these offenders.

Currently, boot camps that offer intervention beyond incarceration and military training typically have classes on drug education (Benda & Pallone, 2005; MacKenzie & Armstrong, 2004). Very few boot camps offer treatment needed by drug offenders (Clark & Aziz, 1996; Clark, Aziz, & MacKenzie, 1994). If these offenders are dropping out because of the lack of treatment, the question then becomes whether to provide drug treatment in boot camps, or create programs specifically designed for drug offenders—such as more drug courts (Gottfredson, 2004). The question of whether to alter admission criteria or the boot camp program lies beyond the scope of the present study. The findings of this study should inform decisions made about how to intervene with drug offenders.

Aside from identifying which offenders did not seem to be responding to the boot camp program by dropping out or being dismissed, this study also provided clues about promising factors that might be targeted to alter the outcome of graduation versus failure in the program. This investigation had an advantage over many classification studies in using factors that were amenable to planned change, such as self-efficacy or use of drugs (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

### **Conceptual framework for the analyses**

Factors analyzed in this study were selected based on a theoretical elaboration (Thornberry, 1989) of life-course theory (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993) using elements taken from social learning theory (Akers, 1998; Akers & Sellers, 2004). Aspects of peer association—modeling, differential reinforcement, normative definitions, forming gangs—were used to elaborate on the life-course explanation because of their potent explanatory value (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Elaboration involved incorporating propositions from another theory without violating the assumptions of the original explanation. In accordance with the assumptions of life-course theory, it was assumed in this study that peer association with individual offenders and gangs facilitated rather than generated unlawful behavior among persons with tenuous bonds to society (Benda, 2002a; Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, & Elder, 2002; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994; Warr, 1998; Zhang, Welte, & Wiczorek, 1999).

Gangs are considered to be conceptually different than ordinary peer associations (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Benda, Toombs, & Pea-

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