

Better or Worse

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Introduction

'Better or Worse' is a comparative study looking at the effect of education on repeat offending by women convicts in Van Dieman's Land. The research question is 'Does the level of education have an effect on the incidence of re-offending by female convicts in VDL?' The definition of 'education' for this study is the ability to read and write. In our study we have three variables related to education, 1) the ability to read and write 2) the ability to read and 3) unable to either read or write. For the purpose of this study the definition of 're-offend' is for a female convict to commit an offence once they have landed in Van Dieman's Land. An offence was not necessarily a crime as such. It was to break the Convict Laws, i.e., insolence towards one's master or mistress, being absent without leave and the like. Obviously, these laws did not apply to the free citizen, only to convicts. Were those women with an education more or less likely to commit offences than those who were poorly educated or who had no education? This is the aim of the study. The original crime committed which resulted in each of the woman being transported is not relevant to this project. There will be no differentiation between minor and more serious offences committed whilst the women are in VDL. Any offence or misdemeanour which was recorded against them, and resulted in some form of punishment, will be included.

Method

All data used was sourced from the Female Convicts Research Database. The females included in the study were 15 years old and over. Essentially this is because the project is a study of adults and also there is not a lot of relevant information available for the younger girls. All of the

women in the database were first divided into age groups with the youngest group aged from 15 to 19 years, and then going up in increments of ten years: 15 – 19; 20 - 29; 30 – 39; 40 – 49; 50 – 59. The oldest group ranged from 60 to 81 years of age because there were relatively few who were in the 70 plus group and it was important to include them. Each age group was then arranged alphabetically and the subjects randomly chosen with one subject taken from A, then one from B and so on. Whilst this was tedious and time consuming the reason behind it was to attempt to ensure an even spread of the year of arrival of each of the subjects. The dates of arrival ranged from 1822 to 1854. A total of 240 subjects were thus selected with the initial group being subdivided into 6 smaller groups of 40. Each of these age groups was further divided on the basis of their level of education: the ability to read and write, able to read only and those who were illiterate and unable to read or write at all.

Table 1.1 Levels of education within each age group.

15 - 19 years		20 - 29 years	
Level of Education	N	Level of Education	N
Read and write	12	Read and write	8
Read	13	Read	11
Neither	15	Neither	21
	N = 40		N = 40

30 - 39 years		40 - 49 years	
Level of Education	N	Level of Education	N
Read and write	17	Read and write	9
Read	10	Read	15
Neither	13	Neither	16
	N = 40		N = 40

50 - 59 years		60+ years	
Level of Education	N	Level of Education	N

Read and write	4	Read and write	4
Read	16	Read	6
Neither	20	Neither	30
	N = 40		N = 40

Of all of the age groups, those in the 30 to 39 years had the highest level of literacy with 17 out of 40 being able to read and write. The next highest was the 15 to 19 year olds with 12 being able to read and write. The lowest levels of literacy were in the 50 to 59 and 60 plus groups. In both groups there were just 4 who could read and write. However, the 50 to 59 year olds had the highest level of those who could read only. There were 16 in this group. The 60 plus group had the highest level of illiteracy with 30 women who could neither read nor write. Based on this, should it be expected that these particular women are more likely to be re-offenders?

Table 1.2 Percentage of re-offenders and their level of education.

15 - 19				20 - 29			
Education		Re-offenders		Education		Re-offenders	
			%				%
R/W	12	5	42%	R/W	8	7	87.50%
Read	13	1	8%	Read	11	7	64%
Neither	15	8	53%	Neither	21	15	71.50%
	N = 40	14			N = 40	29	
30 - 39				40 - 49			
Education		Re-offenders		Education		Re-offenders	
			%				%
R/W	17	9	53%	R/W	9	5	55.50%
Read	10	4	40%	Read	15	5	33%
Neither	13	7	54%	Neither	16	8	50%
	N = 40	20			N = 40	18	

50 -59				60 +			
Education		Re-offenders		Education		Re-offenders	
			%				%
R/W	4	2	50%	R/W	4	0	0%
Read	16	3	19%	Read	6	0	0%
Neither	20	6	30%	Neither	30	7	23%
	N = 40	11			N = 40	7	

Analysis

Table 1.1 shows the education level of all subjects. Only those women who re-offended are included in Table 1.2. For example, in the 60 plus age group, out of the total of 40 subjects, 7 re-offended. Therefore 82.5% of the women did not re-offend despite the very low literacy skills of the group. There were 30 women out of a total of 40 who could neither read nor write. All those who did re-offend were illiterate. This group had the lowest level of re-offending.

The group of women in their 50s were interesting. Whilst having only 4 in their age group who could both read and write, 40% of their number was able to read. This was the highest percentage of any group. They had the second lowest level of re-offenders coming in behind the 60 plus group. This was the only group where the number of re-offenders who could read only was greater than the re-offenders who could read and write.

Of all of the groups those in the 40 to 49 age group are the least striking. They had a high level of illiteracy, but not the highest. They fit fairly well into the patterns set by the other groups.

Women aged from 30 to 39 years had the highest number who could both read and write. There were 17; the next closest group had just 12. This particular age group had the lowest number of women who were illiterate. Whilst they had the highest overall level of literacy, this group did

not have the lowest number of re-offenders. They actually had the second highest. In this group the level of re-offending was very similar for those who could read and write and those who were illiterate.

Women in the 20 to 29 year age group had the highest incidence of re-offending with 72.5% of the group committing offences. There was a high level of illiteracy but the percentage of re-offences by those who could read and write was actually considerably higher than that of those women who were illiterate. Of the women who could both read and write, 87.5% re-offended as compared to 71.5% of those who were illiterate.

The 15 to 19 year old group had the most evenly distributed literacy skills. Their highest level of re-offenders was the illiterate girls with 53% of them re-offending.

Discussion

Generally the groups didn't fit into any particular pattern; it was difficult to make any generalisations. The youngest group of 15 to 19 year olds had a much higher rate of women who could read and write than the oldest groups of 50 to 59 and 60 plus. There were only 4 out of 40 in each of the older groups whilst the younger ones had 12. This wasn't unexpected. Overall the 60 plus group had the lowest literacy rate with 30 who were illiterate. They did however have the lowest rate for re-offenders with only 17.5% re-offending. Most groups had a higher percentage of those who were illiterate than those who could read and write or just read. The 30 to 39 year old group was the exception to this having 17 who could read and write while 13 were illiterate. The next closest group was the 15 to 19 year olds who had 12 able to read and write, plus 15 who were illiterate.

In all age groups the percentage of women who re-offended was different. The youngest group, the 15 to 19s had a rate of 35%. Those in the 20 to 29 bracket had a percentage of 72.5. The 30 to 39 group had 50% while the 40 to 49 was a little lower with 45%. The oldest groups were lower still with the 50 to 59 age group having 27.5% while the oldest women, those 60 plus had the lowest with just 17.5%. It would be a reasonable thing to assume that younger women would be more likely to re-offend than older women, simply because of their youth and attitude to risk taking. This clearly has not been the case here. The youngest group with 35% of re-offenders are the fourth lowest, only coming in ahead of the 50 to 59s and 60 plus groups. Those who appear to have challenged authorities most frequently were the 20 to 29 age group. A whopping 72.5% of these women re-offended, way ahead of the next group who had a total of just 50%. This second group consisted of the 30 to 39 year old women, so not much difference in age.

Conclusion

While this is all very interesting, does it answer our original question of whether the level of education has an effect on the incidence of re-offending? It does indeed. Out of the original group of 240, we have seen that 54 could both read and write; 71 could read only; and the remaining 115 were illiterate. There's nothing surprising thus far. These women least likely to re-offend were those who could read only. The analysis shows that only 28.2% of them re-offended. The next lowest scoring group with re-offending at 44.3% was the illiterate women; those who could neither read nor write. Those most likely to re-offend were those who could both read and write. A whopping 51.8% of these women re-offended. This is almost double the number of those who could read only and still a long way ahead of those who were illiterate.

This was surprising! Why is it so? One could be forgiven for thinking that a woman who could both read and write would have more opportunities in a new, developing society and less need to kick over the traces. Maybe it has nothing to do with opportunity or lack of same. Possibly, just possibly, it can be explained quite simply. If you want less trouble, don't educate your workforce. It has been demonstrated many times, for example by looking at religious institutions encouraging their clergy to obtain a tertiary education. It has led to no end of trouble. Education teaches people to question. This is not particularly welcome in a punitive system.

Our research question was '*Does the level of education have an effect on the incidence of re-offending by female convicts in VDL?*' The answer is an unequivocal yes.

Further studies

There are many areas that could be studied in greater depth. The women in the 20 – 29 year old age group are particularly interesting. What makes these women different to the others in the study? They are neither the youngest nor the oldest but more likely to re-offend than any other section of the study. Why is this so? A second area would be to try to understand why those who can read only are least likely to re-offend.

References

Female Convicts in Van Dieman's Land Database. Female Convicts Research Centre Inc.
<http://femaleconvicts.org.au>