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# Research Review

## BUTNER STUDY: THE FINAL ANALYSIS

### Abstract

The Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) at Butner, North Carolina, has performed its research mission by evaluating a model of imprisonment proposed by Professor Norval Morris. The model emphasizes a positive environment in which inmates are allowed to volunteer for programs, to preserve much of their individuality, and to live in a humane environment. Professor Morris specified the conditions and research design in which the model would be tested. It was to be an experimental design with some of the most difficult inmates as subjects and with an independent research team conducting the evaluation.

The major specifications of the model were met at Butner. The results reported by the University of North Carolina (UNC) research team suggested that: the institution was perceived by the staff and inmates as being positive; there was more active program participation among Butner research inmates than among control group inmates; and, a safer environment was provided for both staff and inmates. A comprehensive follow-up study revealed no marked differences between experimental and control inmates. Implications of the study for correctional practice are discussed.

FCI Butner has served a triple mission since its doors opened to Federal prisoners in 1976. It has housed a "general population" of inmates to be released in the Carolinas and surrounding states, housed and treated mentally ill inmates for the eastern half of the country, and conducted research on issues of importance to the Bureau of Prisons as well as corrections.

The first project undertaken in the Butner research program was the implementation and evaluation of a model of imprisonment proposed by Professor Norval Morris (1974). Morris suggested that our society has an investment in preserving the rights, freedom, dignity, and individuality of all its members, including prisoners. To the extent that prison reflects the values of society, it is important that correctional practitioners limit the restrictions placed on prisoners to those necessary to safely confine them. According to Morris, "prison is, in practice, the ultimate power the democratic state exercises over a citizen" (1974, p. ix). The essential principle in his model is to use the minimum coercion necessary to confine the prisoner for the period of time prescribed by the courts. The function of prison staff, beyond the basics of confinement, is to exercise the least amount of necessary control over the daily lives of prisoners and to assist in the protection of their rights, freedoms, and dignity.

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The topic for this issue of *Research Review* is the evaluation of Professor Norval Morris' model of imprisonment as implemented at the Federal Correctional Institution, Butner, NC. The primary goal of the Morris model was to make the prison environment more humane and to eliminate compulsory elements from program participation. Professor Morris' basic belief is that imprisonment itself is punishment enough. Good conditions of confinement and freedom to choose programs are central aspects of his model.

The model was evaluated with the cooperation of the Federal Probation Division, the Social Security Administration and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The impact of the model on offenders' behavior and program participation while in prison and on behavior after release was measured. The impact of a more humane environment was manifest in a reduction in violence and, when the compulsory nature of program enrollment was removed, there was also more participation in programs and greater likelihood of program completion. Although Butner's prisoners were offered and availed themselves of a wide selection of excellent programs, the programs failed to have any impact on prisoners' post-release criminal activity or job performance.

A great deal has been learned from the Butner experience and new ideas and improved correctional practices have diffused throughout the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Some of these findings are discussed in this overview of the Butner Research Project.

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Director

Professor Morris explained this concept with four basic principles:

1. *Self-help programs must be offered but not required.* Special care must be taken to avoid even the appearance of available incentives outside the value of the programs offered.
2. *Prisoners must have a predetermined length of stay at the institution.* This is one of the mechanisms by which potential staff manipulation is removed.
3. *The institution program must include a gradual testing of the prisoner's suitability for release.* The gradual release procedure must be unrelated to the inmate's program participation and must be established shortly after the inmate arrives at the institution.

4. *The general pattern of life within the institution should be as similar as possible to the ordinary working life of a citizen in the community.* This was to be manifest in such forms as private rooms, personal clothing, and freedom of movement about the institution.

This model was offered at a time when "mainstream" correctional philosophy was undergoing a major upheaval. However, the proposed model did not represent a complete departure from the traditional rehabilitation approach. Professor Morris included therapeutic or "small living groups" in the model. They were to include intensive therapeutic sessions in which inmates were encouraged to review their lives and discuss their own involvement in criminal activity. These groups represent the only exception to the voluntary programming feature of the model.

Professor Morris specified the design for testing the model. The institution in which the model would be tested must be relatively small (200 inmates) and be comprised entirely of participating inmates. Participants would include only inmates who are: 18-35 years of age; repeat and violent offenders; within one to three years of release from incarceration (to permit a reasonably timed follow-up); and randomly selected. Selected inmates would be randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. An "opt-out" procedure was prescribed to allow experimental inmates to return to their former institutions without any negative consequences. This was offered as an ethical compromise to the requirement that randomly selected inmates be moved to Butner. Morris also stipulated that the study was to be conducted by a group administratively independent of the prison.

#### **STUDY I: Institution Performance**

A University of North Carolina (UNC) research team, under the direction of Professor Lee Bounds, began the project in July 1976. Data included in the study report (Bounds, et al, 1979) were limited to inmates released after January 1, 1977.

Bounds, et al defined their mission as the assessment of the effects of the model prison on inmate behavior and on the administrative management of that institution. The UNC team also assumed the task of identifying the elements of the model that were actually implemented. It is important to note that the model was assessed within the total institution environment and the impact of each element of the model was not separately assessed.

#### **Implementation of a Modified Morris Model**

One of the major differences from the Morris model described by Bounds, et al was that only two of seven living units included participants in the research program. That is, the entire institution was not included in the program. Nonetheless, the institution, at the time of the study, accommodated individual housing for 340 inmates and was relatively small in comparison with other

Federal prisons. FCI Butner has the physical design of most new Federal prisons which is quite similar to the arrangements envisioned by Morris. Most other deviations included composition of staff and a few differences in Bureau furlough policies. The remaining characteristics of the model specified by Professor Morris were, in fact, implemented at Butner.

#### **Method**

*Subjects.* All Federal prisoners who were eligible for participation:

- had one or more prior convictions and/or had a conviction for a violent offense.
- were between 18 and 35 years of age.
- had a release date within one to three years of selection.
- did not require special mental or physical care beyond that offered in any Federal prison.
- were not involved in notorious crimes or members of militant groups.
- had a release residence in the Southeast part of the United States.

Participants were randomly selected from a pool of all eligible male inmates in the custody of the Bureau of Prisons from July 1, 1976, through May 1, 1979. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental treatment at Butner or remained in their respective institutions serving as the control group. The sample studied by Bounds, et al included 594 prisoners, 345 experimental and 249 control inmates. In addition, there were 93 Butner inmates who exercised their option to return to their former institution, "opt-outs."

*Procedure.* Members of the experimental group were transferred to FCI, Butner from their previous institutions. They were informed by the unit teams that they would have 90 days in which to decide whether they would remain at Butner or return to their previous institution (i.e., "opt out"). They were also told that they would maintain this "opt-out" privilege throughout their stay at Butner. After the 90 day period, each inmate had a formal meeting with the unit team during which he expressed his decision. Inmates who chose to remain at the facility were given graduated release plans that specified dates of furlough eligibility, town trips, and dates of release to halfway houses. It was also specified that their program participation would not affect these dates and they were encouraged, but not required, to participate in the small living groups. The control inmates were not informed of their participation in the project and only central file data were collected on them.

Inmates in the Butner group were interviewed on arrival (Phase I) and during the middle portion of their stay (Phase II). Staff at Butner were also interviewed periodically during the course of the study. Central file data were collected from institution records of both the experimental and control groups. These data provided information on program participation, incident reports, work assignments, and visitation.

**Results**

**Descriptive Characteristics.** To check the random assignment procedure, Bounds compared experimentals and controls on a variety of measures and found no statistically significant differences (see Table 1). The difference between experimentals and controls for longest prior sentence in months (36.4 versus 28.0) was not significant, but suggests greater criminal prior history for experimentals.

Other characteristics of the two groups (plus "opt-outs") suggest a sophisticated criminal population overall. For example, the combined mean age (experimentals, controls, and "opt-outs") at first arrest (18

years) reflects the large number of offenders (23%) who were first arrested between the ages of 5 and 14. Nearly half (48%) were arrested for the first time during their 15th to 19th years.

The 93 inmates who "opted out" differ from the remaining experimental inmates only in terms of the length of their current sentence. That difference was statistically significant. The "opt-outs" had an average of 52.8 months to serve and the balance of the research inmates had an average of 80.1 months to serve in their total sentence. They did not differ on any other characteristics.

**Table 1**  
**COMPARISONS OF BUTNER RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND "OPT-OUTS"**  
**AND CONTROL GROUP INMATES.<sup>1</sup>**

Variable	Butner Research Group Remaining (n = 345)	"Opt-outs" (n = 93)	Other Institutions Control Group (n = 249)
Race			
Non-white	180 (53.4%)	39 (41.7%)	120 (52.2%)
White	157 (46.6)	54 (58.3)	110 (47.8)
Marital Status			
Married <sup>2</sup>	109 (35.7)	26 (28.9)	80 (37.9)
Single <sup>3</sup>	92 (30.2)	32 (35.6)	73 (34.6)
Other	104 (34.1)	32 (35.6)	58 (27.5)
Mean Age	34.9	34.8	34.5
Mean Education	9.9	10.1	9.9
Mean Age at First Arrest	17.8	17.8	18.0
Total Number of Prior Arrests	11.6	10.0	11.8
Total Number Prior Commitments of 6 or more Months.	3.3	3.0	3.0
Longest Prior Sentence in Months	36.4	36.6	28.0
Length of Current Sentence in Months	80.1	52.8	73.6
Severity of Offense <sup>4</sup>	3.9	3.8	4.2
Salient Factor Score <sup>5</sup>	4.7	5.1	4.6

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from data provided by Bounds, et al 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Includes cohabitation.

<sup>3</sup> Includes divorced and widowed.

<sup>4</sup> Severity is based on U.S. Parole Commission Guidelines where severity scores range from 0-9. Zero indicates low severity; nine indicates high severity.

<sup>5</sup> A score used by the U.S. Parole Commission to assess an offender's risk of recidivism. The scores range from 0-11, 11 indicating a very good risk.

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*Inmate Adjustment.* Butner's research inmates committed fewer sanctionable offenses than control group inmates at their respective institutions.<sup>1</sup> However, the group differences did not reach statistical significance.

Some qualitative aspects of institution rule infractions were different between groups. Butner's experimental inmates were drawn from prisons where the assault rates are traditionally nearly twice as high as the rates observed among the Butner experimentals. However, a test of the difference between average incident severity level (amount of bodily harm or property damage done) between experimentals and controls was not significant. This suggests that the Butner group was not as openly confrontive, although overall the kinds of violations they committed were about what would be expected.

*Program Participation.* Butner experimentals enrolled in and completed more programs than controls. The average number of program enrollments was 3.5 for experimentals and 1.5 for controls. Experimentals completed 2.7 programs compared with 0.9 for the controls. Because of the special relevance to today's correctional thinking that inmates should work, learn trades and attend school—these types of programs were analyzed separately. The experimentals enrolled in twice as many vocational training and education programs as the controls (1.9 vs. 1.0) and they completed twice as many programs (2.4 vs. 1.1).<sup>2</sup>

*Inmate Perceptions of Butner.* Inmates were interviewed 2-3 months after arrival and again about 6 months later if they remained after the initial exposure period. At the first interview meeting, inmates were asked why they decided to stay at Butner; their results are revealing: "too much hassle to return" (24%); "closer to family" (20%); "programs" (19%); "living conditions" (17%); "release opportunities" (17%); and, "better staff" (11%). Most of the opt-outs (also interviewed) indicated that they decided to leave mainly to be closer to their families. Six months later, Butner inmates provided additional evaluative information about the prison. Safety was the most highly rated feature. What else did the experimentals like about Butner?:

- friendliness (94%)
- cleanliness (86%)
- institution jobs (84%)
- fellow prisoners (76%)
- quietness (65%)
- staff (61%)

The elimination of coercion is central to Morris' thinking. Interviewers, therefore, asked inmates about the "pay offs" for program participation. Inmates were about evenly split; half expressed beliefs that custody reductions and furloughs were pay offs for participating in programs. This central element of coerciveness (viewed from the perspective of experimentals) was not entirely removed although staff took steps to see that "rewards" and program participation were not linked.

An additional major feature of the Morris model is the Graduated Release Plan. The plan is designed to provide a systematic testing of inmates' release readiness and to establish eligibility dates for furloughs, town trips, and halfway house transfers. The majority of inmates felt their plans were satisfactory; they frequently stated to interviewers that the release plan provided greater certainty about their future.

*Staff Perspectives About Butner.* The staff at Butner were surveyed in 1977 and in 1979. The Correctional Institution Environment Scale was used in both years along with an instrument titled "Butner Staff Survey" developed to assess management styles and issues.

About 75% of the staff were satisfied with personal safety in both surveys. Staff were nearly unanimous in their approval of the degree of open communication between inmates and staff. Both surveys showed staff are very positive about Butner.

### STUDY II: Follow-Up Evaluation

This early phase of Butner's evaluation of the Morris model ended in 1979 with the general conclusion that Butner staff had implemented Morris' model and that inmates and staff were reacting very favorably.

But, would the positive environment which made Butner easier to manage also affect inmate criminal activity and labor market performance after release? These propositions were tested in Phase II with mixed results (Witte, et al, 1983).<sup>3</sup>

For the follow-up period (1980 to 1981), there were no significant differences on any of the measures of post-release criminal justice system contact if opt-outs are included in the analyses. If opt-outs are removed and the experimentals are compared with controls, the experimentals took a longer time to fail but were arrested more frequently. On the more crucial element, conviction after an arrest, with or without the opt-outs, there were no differences between Butner inmates and controls (see Table 2). Therefore, the Butner program probably doesn't affect the likelihood of post-release criminal activity.

**Table 2**  
**POST-RELEASE CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS.**

	Arrested	Convicted	Most Serious Offense for Which Arrested		
			Against Persons	Property Crimes	Time to First Arrest
Experimental	58%	38%	22%	20%	16 mo.
With Opt-outs	60%	39%	24%	19%	17 mo.
Control	52%	31%	15%	23%	14 mo.

Post-release labor market performance was based on data provided by the parole officers and the Social Security Administration. Overall, the control group received a higher wage on their first job after release, but the experimental group improved their hourly wage rate quickly and achieved parity with the controls.<sup>4</sup>

Overall then, there were few differences between the Butner releasees and the controls. The conclusion: exposure to Butner did not "help" the releasees perform better on these post-release performance measures.

### General Conclusions

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, it can be clearly demonstrated that a group of sophisticated, dangerous and experienced criminals can be housed in prisons where a central management philosophy emphasizes individual rights. This difficult to manage population functions very well under these circumstances. When inmates were allowed to volunteer for programs, they not only participated in more programs, but they also completed more programs. There were fewer disciplinary problems and fewer assaults.

Second, the study demonstrates how difficult it is to modify an inmate's post-release behavior. Given all the opportunities for self improvement at Butner, one could expect a prisoner's post-release behavior to show some improvement. It is not entirely clear why the Butner inmates failed to improve in post-release behavior when compared to the control group of inmates, but several reasonable hypotheses exist.

During the period of the Butner experiment, the correctional profession was undergoing considerable change. The turmoil of the times produced many changes that affected the control and experimental groups. Additionally, in the real world of corrections, the exposure encountered by control groups cannot be held constant. Programs that proved viable at Butner were quickly adopted by other institutions, thereby exposing the control group to the same treatment modalities encountered by the Butner experimental group. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the conduct of a pure experiment in corrections is a difficult task.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Inmate misconduct and program participation figures were adjusted for length of time "at risk" or "at Butner."

<sup>2</sup>It is always possible that these findings reflect artifactual differences between Butner and other prisons (i.e., differences in program attractiveness or record keeping); but, it is *more* likely that these are

genuine differences. Program offerings at Butner were not substantially different from those of any other institution and further, frequencies of incomplete records, and other indicators of record keeping were not different between the control and experimental groups.

<sup>3</sup>Data were gathered on 345 experimentals and 249 controls reported on by Bounds. Witte gathered post-release outcome on an additional 120 experimentals and 10 controls who were considered for but not included in the sample reported on by Bounds. There was a total of 724 experimental and control inmates. There was no significant difference between the experimental and control inmates in number of missing cases.

<sup>4</sup>Income data were gathered in clusters by the Social Security Administration, which provided salary levels for groups of 4 or 5 inmates at a time. These data were available for 691 of the 724 eligible inmates.

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