

# Faith and Character Based Initiatives in Corrections: Do They Work?

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## *Abstract*

*The United States has the largest prison population per capita in the world. Florida has taken a proactive position regarding this issue with the opening of three Faith and Character-Based prisons, seven dormitories located at other state correctional facilities, and one county facility. Information was obtained through personal surveys of inmates who are currently participating in these types of programs, inmates who have participated in these programs and been re-arrested, and inmates who have participated in these types of programs and left the criminal justice system altogether. This information was combined with statistical data provided by the Department of Corrections to determine if the faith and character based initiative in Florida is successful and helping to reduce Florida's prison population.*

## Introduction

Jail and prison overcrowding has become the norm within the state of Florida. Every county deals with this problem at some point in time. Even though state and county government differ in many ways, in this aspect they both share the same problem. Because state and county correctional facilities face similar problems such as growth and budgetary constraints Florida finds itself in the middle of a crisis on how to effectively deal with the issue of inmate incarceration and release.

Statistics show that the United States prison population is increasing every year and has risen from 546 inmates per 100,000 in 1993 to 700 inmates per 100,000 U.S. citizens in 2003 (Wagner, 2006). Florida's state prison population has increased 37% in the past ten years. Florida is also experiencing huge growth with 1,000 people moving into the state each day (Klay, 2005). With the amount of growth that Florida is experiencing, coupled with the demand for more prison and jail space the state finds itself at a crossroad and searching for alternatives in dealing with this problem.

Law enforcement professionals are charged with protecting society from people who choose not to conform to society's standards or laws. The mechanism to carry out these responsibilities is incarceration. If someone violates the ordinances or laws put into place we arrest them and let the judicial system take care of the matter. Violent Crimes are up during 2005. A 2.5% increase over 2004 (Uniform Crime Report, 2005). How can that be? If we are incarcerating more people, then our country should be a safer place. Apparently we are not safer. Statistically of 100 serious crimes that are reported only 25 arrests are made, 12 convictions are obtained, and only 3 get sent to prison (Fangmeier, 1980). To make matters worse statistics also do not take into account the number of crimes that occur that are not reported, so to be perfectly frank, the problem is worse than we think.

The United States antiquated philosophy of lock them up and throw away the key simply does not work and has actually created a newer philosophy of what else can we do (Fangmeier, 1980). With that in mind the question must be asked if our current system is not working then what needs to be done to make our society safer? And how do we reduce the inmate population at the same time? As a manager within detention it is important to take a systems approach to these problems and understand the relevance of the statistics we are given. Detention managers must consider every alternative available when strategically planning for the future of their organization. Faith and character based initiatives are one alternative. The question that we as managers must ask is, do they work? In other words do these initiatives prevent re-offenses, do they create productive citizens, or are they merely political marketing tools?

The purpose of this research is to determine if Florida's faith and character based initiatives are successful and a viable option for reducing the inmate population within the state. Statistical data from the Uniform Crime Report reports that violent crime throughout the nation has increased 2.5% from 2004 to 2005. In addition to this Florida's inmate population has also increased a total of 37% over the last ten years, (Appendix A). The link between a steady increase in crime and a rising inmate population only reinforces that the United States is either facing a problem or will in the near future.

Understanding this problem, Fangmeier (1980) states that the attitudes of society still take a hard line approach however, the public frustration with our existing criminal justice system is encouraging a "what else can we do" attitude. This attitude has facilitated the inception of faith and character based programs in corrections. In order to determine the effectiveness or success of faith and character based programs in corrections the parameters for effectiveness must be established.

## Methods

The methods used were personal interviews and surveys. Interviews were conducted of individuals who have previously participated in Faith or Character Based programs and not been rearrested, those who have been rearrested, and inmates who are presently participating in these types of programs in the Florida State Department of Corrections.

Two individuals who had previously participated in Faith or Character Based programs and had not been rearrested were interviewed. One of them had participated in a county based program within Florida and the second interview was completed of a person who had participated in a Faith or Character Based program operated in the Florida Department of Corrections, which is a state operated program.

Interviews of inmates who are currently participating in Faith or Character Based programs were also conducted. These interviews were conducted with two inmates who are in the state Faith or Character Based initiative in Hillsborough Correctional Institute, which is a state operated program. They were asked subjective questions related to the effectiveness of the program that they participate in and the changes that have been made and will continue to be made after their release.

Interviews of inmates who had previously participated in a Faith or Character Based program and had been re-arrested and incarcerated were conducted. Three inmates were interviewed and asked questions related to the effectiveness of the program, the changes in their lives, their outlook on the future as it related to insight provided by the program, and the potential for a successful life and exiting the criminal justice system for good.

Surveys were distributed to inmates who are participating in Faith and Character Based programs at the Polk County Jail (Appendix B). The surveys asked multiple subjective questions that made the respondent reflect upon their expectations from the program, their willingness and determination to succeed while in the program as well as after leaving the program. All participants within this program are voluntary and are screened to meet certain admission criteria that focused on security issues and charges. Survey participation was also voluntary and responses were received at approximately 90% of the surveys distributed were returned.

## Results

Fifty surveys were distributed to inmates who are presently participating in the Faith Based program at the Polk County Jail. Of the 50 surveys distributed, 35 were returned back to my office completed. Of the inmates who participated in this survey process 100% of the inmates surveyed believed that the program provides the inmates with the necessary tools to change their lives. The inmates who responded to the surveys also indicated that even if they were re-arrested it would not be because of the program, but of their failure. Lastly, of the inmates who responded the obstacles for success varied quite a bit (Appendix C).

The surveys did not provide any significant value as it relates to the success of Faith and character based programs other than there are two discernable groups of individuals within these programs, those that desire to apply what the program offers in hopes of success and those who are "gaming" the system for an easier life while they are incarcerated. Hoping what is learned in a program and the chance of success post-program is usually dependent upon application of the principles learned within the program.

Three interviews were conducted with inmates who had been re-arrested and incarcerated at the Polk County Jail. Two of the three stated that the program provided ample guidance and opportunity for change and considered the program to be a success despite their circumstances. They also stated that success and change in a person's life can not be quantified simply through recidivism. They were adamant in that a significant positive change can be made or achieved regardless of any further incidents of incarceration. They defined success as "quality of life." Even though they were in jail again, they claimed that they had received enough guidance to establish a foundation to build upon once they were released. They took issue with the fact that they were considered failures by program guidelines simply because they had been re-arrested.

The remaining interview was not productive. The inmate clearly did not “get it” while he was a participant in the program at the Polk County Jail. I had personally spoken with this inmate at the outset of this project and during his first incarceration. His attitude and denial of responsibility for his present incarceration were totally opposite of that displayed in the prior interview.

Technically all three of these inmates are classified as failures by program coordinators because of their re-arrest and incarceration despite the difference in attitude and beliefs.

Thirdly interviews were conducted of ex-inmates who completed the faith based program and have not been re-arrested. These ex-inmates are considered successes in the eyes of the Department of Corrections as well as in our program. The ex-inmates that were contacted and provided information for this project shared some similar information. The first is that they each shared a “conversion experience” while in the faith or character based programs. According to Jablecki, “morality is inseparably linked to religion and that a religious “conversion” is necessary to produce a permanent change in the thinking and conduct of any person (Jablecki, 2005).” This logic is in line with what Massey states about the formation of morals and values in a person’s life by the age of seven. Even though there might be some dispute about the age and time of accountability for behavior the fact remains that it is developed early in a person’s life and it takes a significant emotional event in a person’s life to alter these values and/or behavior.

A second similarity among the ex-inmates who were considered to be successes is that their faith went beyond just a conversion experience. They actually put into action what they had been taught while in the faith and character based programs. This is in alignment with what Jablecki said about accountability being an intricate part of success. The Bible teaches that faith without works is dead. In other words faith within a person will produce works that prove there has been a change in that person. Of the five people contacted each are actively engaged in sharing their testimony and what has transpired in their life as a result of God and the Faith and Character Based programs.

Each of the individuals who were classified as successes and interviewed was at different points of walk in their lives. One had been released within the year and was still trying to restore family relationships and develop a strategy for obtaining his goals for him as well as those for his family. The other had been out for close to ten years. She in particular responsible for getting the faith based program started in Polk County and operates her own second chance shelter for ex-offenders.

Faith and character based programs are not exclusive to Florida. Other states such as Texas, Georgia, Iowa, Tennessee, Minnesota, Kansas, Maryland, California, Tennessee, Arkansas and Ohio all have Faith Based programs of some type in operation (Jablecki, 2005). This type of program has also expanded outside the boundaries of the United States to New Zealand.

The primary focal point or benchmark for success in Faith or Character Based Programs in other states as well as that in New Zealand is recidivism. While the primary driving force is to lower the inmate population the program in New Zealand actually seems to have more substance to it and is concerned about the reintegration of the offender back into society. According to Prison Fellowship of New Zealand, Operation

Jericho has a mentoring aspect that assists the offenders as they transition back into society after leaving prison. This process of accountability and responsibility is a vital portion of the program. According to Prison Fellowship most offenders would not solidly connect with a church after release and without this source of spiritual and social support the Faith Based effort in New Zealand would be seeing limited success.

There are additional characteristics that successful programs have in common and they are:

- Mentoring networks and aftercare programs
- Privately funded
- No time limitations for participation within the program
- Life Skills training
- Value training
- Self help education
- Church / State cooperative programs
- High participation in religious programs

The program in Polk County is trying to benchmark many of the practices of the state operated program at Hillsborough Correctional Institute. Chaplain Marchman stated that the mentoring portion of the program at her facility is the most important part of the program. Chaplain Marchman stated that it is these relationships that are so vital to the success of her program and makes the long term difference for the ex-inmate.

Limited information could be found on faith based programs within the United States and their results. However, according to Berkowitz, the faith based program in Iowa was shut down because of judicial review and lack of separation of church and state. The program was also instructed to reimburse the state for funding of the program. Whenever the topic of faith based programs and state funding in corrections are merged this issue has to be dealt with. In the Department of Corrections as well as the program at Polk County these programs are strictly volunteer-based and any funding must be generated from outside donations and is kept completely separate from the funding of state and county government. This is one reason why these programs seem to be flourishing. The issue of separation of church and state is a non-issue. This allows these programs to focus on the true issues of changing lives.

## Discussion

It appears that the primary quantifying mode for success is recidivism. This is problematic because recidivism does not give a true indication of success or failure. An example of this would be an inmate whose life has not been affected or "changed" and can stay out of jail will be counted as a success. According to the parameters set forth by state Department of Corrections officials as well as Polk County Jail program coordinators recidivism is the only quantifying measure for success in these programs. But is this accurate? On the other hand a person whose life was touched and made substantial strides towards making a change in their life but got re-arrested should they

be considered a failure? Which is correct? According to each of these program coordinators both are, but to ministry lay people neither is. Therein lies the problem, the subjectivity of the definition of success. The subjectivity of this topic really lends itself to vagueness and no certain definitive answer can be made concerning these types of programs.

When dealing with spiritual or character based issues application is usually harder than simple theory or information given by a professor on an academic level. Personal change involves accountability and ethics are usually defined as doing the right thing when no one else is looking. Ethical behavior is harder to learn late in life. Our belief system is formed early in life and usually developed by age seven (Massey, 1986). Massey, states that from zero to age seven our character are being developed and by age ten we are already starting to model what we have learned and accepted as our values. With that being said, these programs would appear to be a waste of time. However, an opposing view is that these programs are filled with people wanting a change and searching for anything to grasp onto that will provide a way out of their existing life.

Either way, success can not be determined simply by interviewing participants in these types of programs and success is something that can not be easily discerned. While lower recidivism rates might be the long term objective for these types of programs they might not be true indicators of success.

Most faith based programs fail because they do not have adequate follow up or accountability after the inmate is released from prison or jail in this case (Jablecki, 2005). The first inmate interviewed received the information needed to change his life and wanted it to work; however, without any accountability after his release was set up for failure and reverted back into the behavior that he knew prior to his incarceration. Change comes about from constant monitoring and through acceptance of responsibility on the part of the inmate or person who desires to change (Jablecki, 2005). If this piece is not present change will not occur. This is in part due to the fact that most inmates go right back into the same environment that they left when they were arrested. This makes the likelihood of and long term change minimal at most.

So, who failed in the case of the inmate who was interviewed at the Polk County Jail and did not seem to have the spirit about him as he did while he was in the Faith Based program? He was one of the first groups of inmates to participate in this program and the mechanism for mentoring after release had not been fully developed by the time of his release. With that in mind, the program failed. However, a counter point that anyone desiring to change their life understands a couple of principles; first, they can't do it on their own, and secondly, changing who you are is a daily battle. I know from personal experience I am still fight many of the demons that plagued my life early on. The point is that there is some responsibility on the part of the ex-inmate to try and get plugged in to make his newly found faith a reality.

It is hard to determine if in fact this inmate can be classified as a "failure." According to the parameters set forth in our program as well as that in the state program his re-arrest labels him as a "failure." However, further analysis might yield a different result or indicate that he did not fail. Certainly his arrest so soon after his arrest does not indicate that any change took place. But, if a seed was sown when he was in the program, sometimes that seed does not produce fruit immediately. Something that

was said or learned while he was in the program might finally take root later on and make a difference that we will never see and be considered later to be a success. That is why success can not be quantified very easily.

Humans by nature are goal oriented. Because of this innate characteristic if these types of programs are going to facilitate change in people's lives the programs must have a two fold purpose (Ward and Brown, 2004). The first is to provide spirituality to the point of a conversion experience and secondly, motivate the participants to the point that they view this alternative way of life as personally meaningful and valuable. Ward and Brown go on to say that the only way to reduce recidivism is to teach inmates how to manage certain aspect of their lives rather than just merely avoid or be a deterrent to punishment. This is where programs come into play within Faith and Character Based programs. Each of these components is crucial to the success of an offender or inmate after they leave a program, but they are interdependent if the offender or inmate is going to realize true success post-faith or character based program.

## Conclusions

Success as defined by Wikipedia is the meeting of goals, and failure is defined as the inability to meet goals. With that being said, in order to determine success for these programs one must be able to determine if the goals are being met. According to the Department of Corrections within the state of Florida the criteria or scorecard for success is determined by examining the recidivism rates and disciplinary reports for the faith and character based prisons versus the same data at related prisons that have similar profiles statewide.

In Florida there are a total of three faith based prisons, Lawtey C.I., Wakulla C.I., and Hillsborough C.I. There are another seven prisons that have faith and character based dorms. Those prisons are Everglades C.I., Polk C.I., Tomoka C.I., Gulf C.I., Lancaster C.I., Union C.I., and Lowell C.I. The data provided by the Department of Corrections is shown in Appendix D.

The statistical data indicates that the prisons that are solely faith based do show signs of improvement in the categories they have set as measurements for success.

Disciplinary reports are down 49% at the faith based prison at Lawtey C.I. and 75% lower at the faith based facility located at Hillsborough C.I. Recidivism is also lower at both facilities than the state average. The state average for recidivism is 70% and recidivism at Lawtey C.I. is 8% and Hillsborough C.I. is 2%. The Department of Corrections states that this data is not mature as of July 2006 to be used for comparison purposes. With that being said no true answer can be given as to whether or not these programs are successful. Another consideration for this data is that there is a potential for inmates who have participated in these programs at the state level could have been re-arrested and not been given prison time. This should be considered recidivism, but is probably overlooked at the state level.

As far as the faith based program in Polk County the recidivism rates for inmates who have participated in this program is estimated at 14% while the inmate recidivism rate for inmates who have not been a part of the program is estimated at 53%. Lastly, a

potential problem for faith based programs that receive funding is to “cook the books” in order to make the programs seem more effective. This is not an issue for any of the faith based programs in Florida because they are all volunteer staffed and operated.

Overall, the analysis of the data collected indicates that progress is being made. However, the goal of this assignment was to be able to ascertain conclusively if Faith Based programs are a success or not. My personal opinion is that these programs are making a difference, just not to the point of impact that we in government or society expect. The expectations for any new idea, program, or initiative is that it will immediately rectify the problem that they have been formed to alleviate. Because of expansiveness of the problem of the inmate population in Florida Faith Based programs are not the quick fix that they are always touted to be in the media. The results of this type of program or effort will be slow and take time to make any significant change in the problem of our increasing inmate population in Florida.

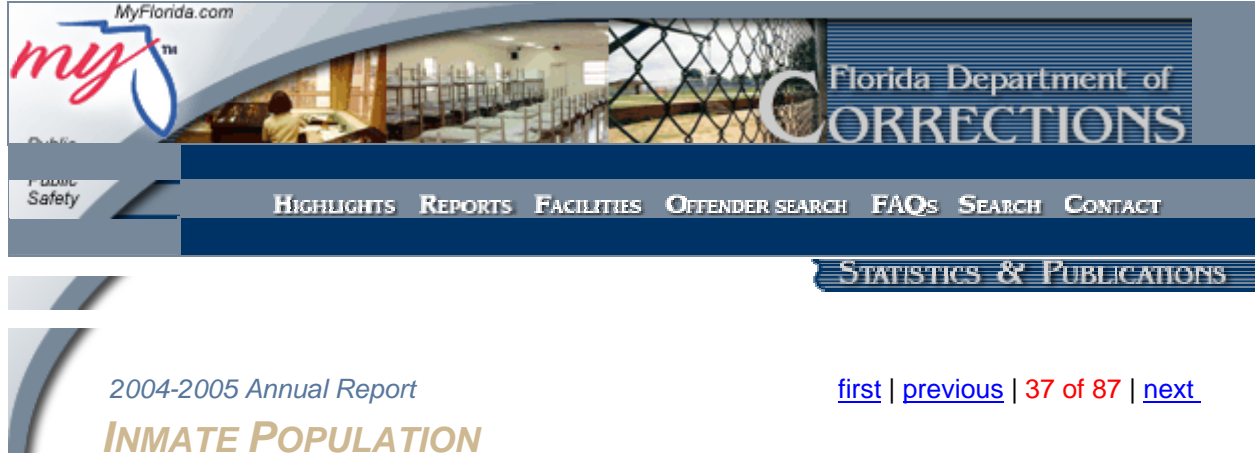
Rick Hohl is a Lieutenant with the Polk County Sheriff's Office and has been in corrections since 1986. Rick's current assignment is the Inmate Programs Section Commander which oversees the operations of the Faith Based Program at the Polk County Sheriff's Office. Rick has an Associate of Arts, a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice and a Master's degree in Business from St. Leo University. Rick also graduated from the Florida Certified Public Manager Program from Florida State University.



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## Appendix A



The header features the MyFlorida.com logo on the left, a central image of a prison interior, and the Florida Department of Corrections logo on the right. Below the image is a navigation menu with links for HIGHLIGHTS, REPORTS, FACILITIES, OFFENDER SEARCH, FAQs, SEARCH, and CONTACT. A secondary menu for STATISTICS & PUBLICATIONS is located below the navigation menu. On the left side, there is a link for the 2004-2005 Annual Report and a page indicator showing '37 of 87'.

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STATISTICS & PUBLICATIONS

2004-2005 Annual Report [first](#) | [previous](#) | 37 of 87 | [next](#)

**INMATE POPULATION**

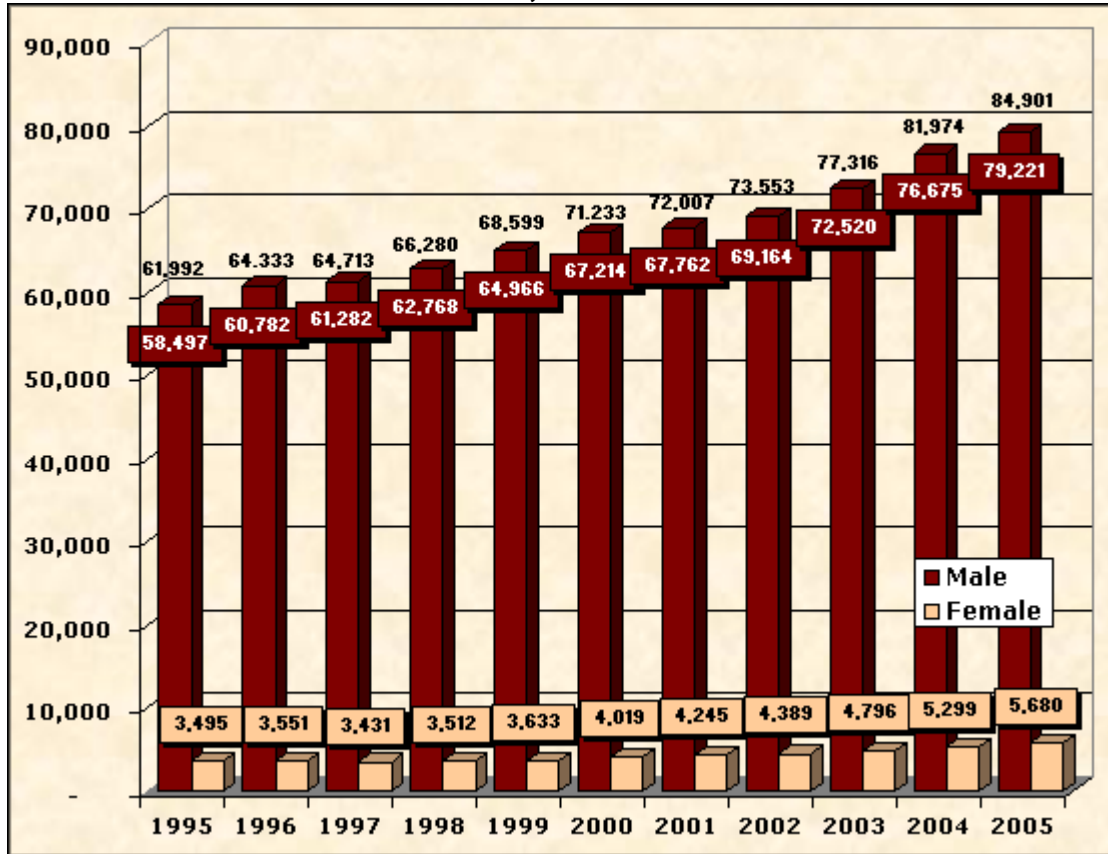
# Florida Prison Population Jumps 3.6% Since Last Fiscal Year

Inmate population refers to the 84,901 inmates who were present in the Florida prison system on June 30, 2005. The following tables and charts will detail the characteristics of these inmates. Other fiscal years are also featured to illustrate trends.

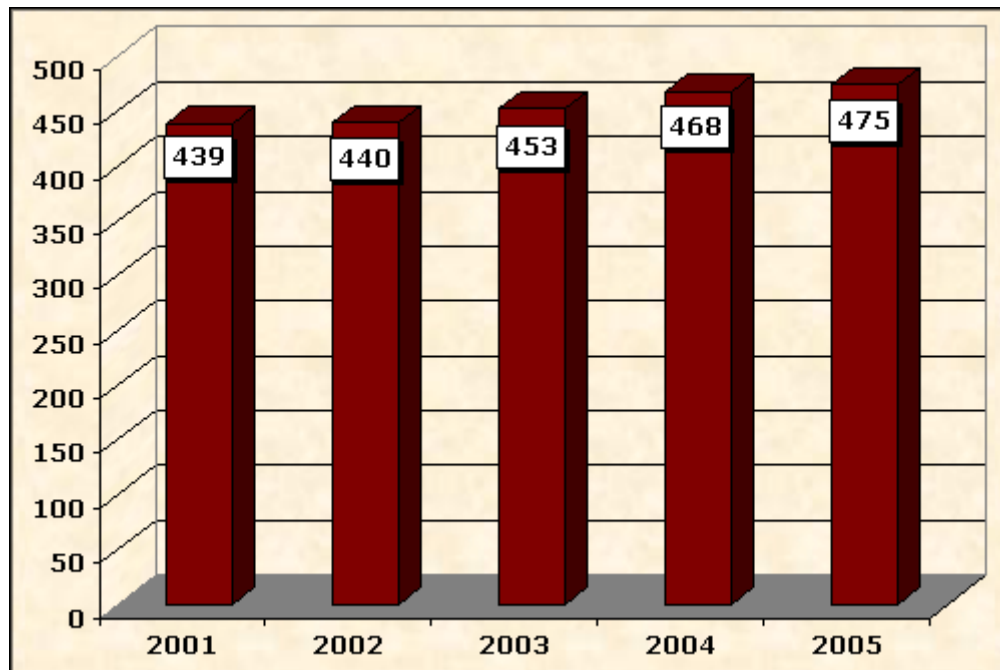
The number of inmates in prison rose 37.0% over the last 10 years from: 61,992 in June 1995 to 84,901 in June 2005. There was a 19.2% rise in inmate population since 2000 and a 3.6% increase since last fiscal year.

On June 30, 2005, 475 of every 100,000 Floridians were incarcerated compared to 439 in 2001.

### INMATE POPULATION ON JUNE 30, 1995-2005



### INMATES INCARCERATED ON JUNE 30 (PER 100,000 FLORIDA POPULATION)



Appendix B

Faith and Character Based Program Survey

Please fill the questions listed below. Your input is very much needed:

1. Why are you in the faith based dorm?

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2. What is different about this program from others you have participated in?

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3. What will be the hardest obstacle that you will have to face and overcome once you leave this program?

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4. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to make a successful change in your life?

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5. Has this program given you the tools to change your life? If so what?

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6. What do you need to do in order for this program to successfully impact your life?

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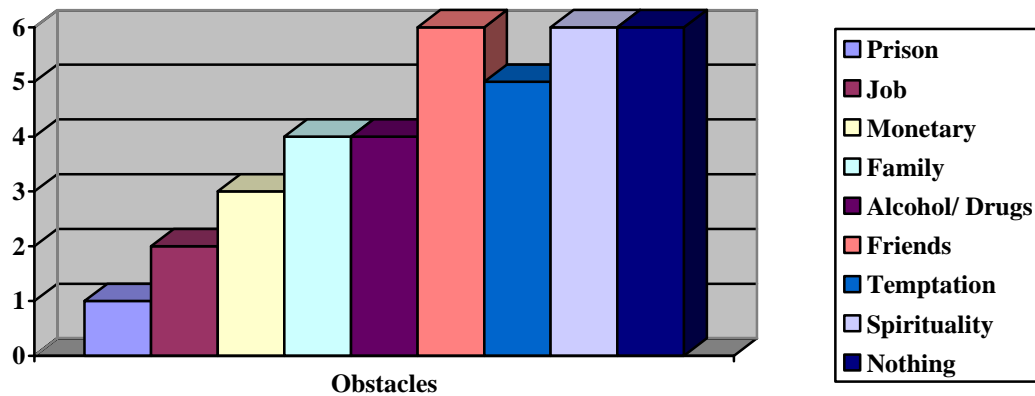
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7. If you get re-arrested can you still believe that this program made a difference? If so why?

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### Appendix C



### Appendix D

#### Florida D.O.C. Faith and Character Based Statistical Data

	Dr.s	Recidivism		
		Returned	Inmates Participated	Percentage
Lawtey C.I.	134	85	1010	8%
Statewide Similar Prisons	275			
Percentage	49%			70%

Wakulla C.I.	Data not available (opened 11/23/05)		
Statewide Similar Prisons			

	Dr.s	Returned	Inmates Participated	Percentage
Hillsborough C.I.	223	20	936	2%
Statewide Similar Prisons	296			
Percentage	75%			70%

D.O.C. disclaimer - that all data has not matured as of July 2006