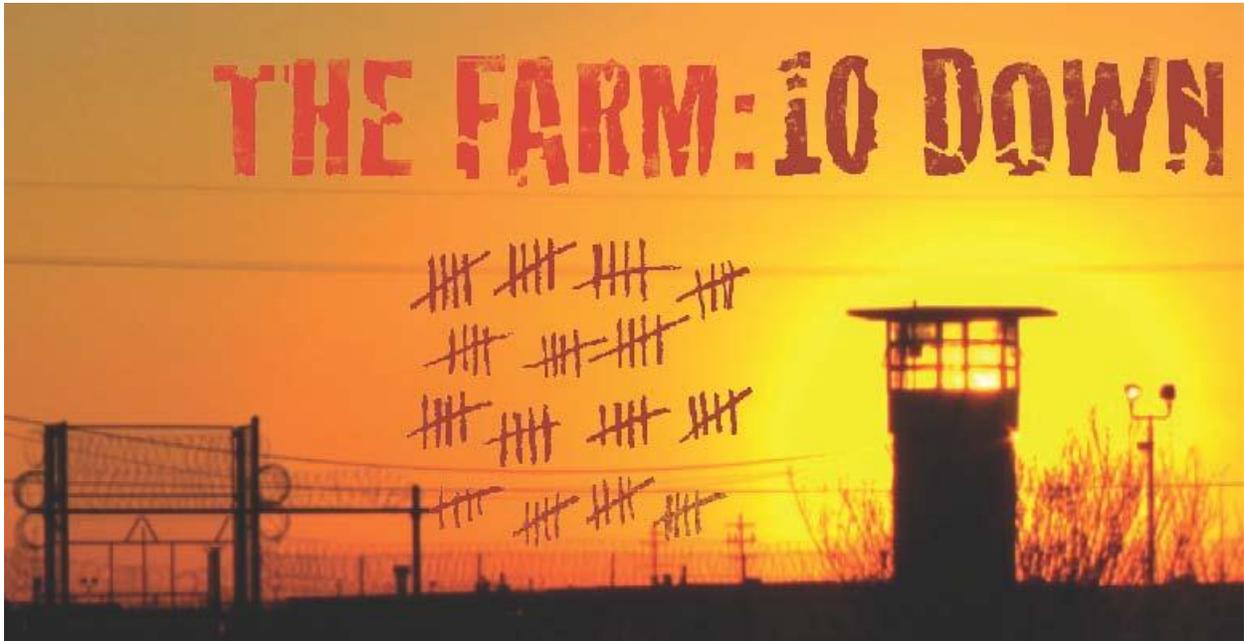


EVALUATING THE FARM: 10 DOWN

ASSESSING DOCUMENTARY FILM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



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EVALUATING THE FARM: 10 DOWN

I.	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
II.	INTRODUCTION	1
III.	IMPACT	4
	Educating Viewers	.....	6
	Challenging Existing Ideas	.....	7
	Transforming Attitudes	.....	8
	Promoting Discussion	.....	10
IV.	CONCLUSION	.....	11
V.	APPENDIX	.....	12

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1952, Paul Rotha described documentary film as “methods of recording...so as to appeal either to reason or emotion, for the purpose of stimulating the desire for, and the widening of, human knowledge and understanding.”¹ Documentary films are designed to engage and entertain the viewer, but also to educate and enlighten. As Richard Barsam noted, “the documentary is distinguished from factual film by its sociopolitical purpose. Great art can be an instrument for social influence and change.”²

The film, *The Farm: Angola, USA*, directed by Jonathan Stack and Liz Garbus, provides a prominent example of a documentary that, through storytelling, can serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of social and political messages. Received with critical acclaim and nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary feature, a *Variety* reviewer wrote about the film that “the contrast between convicts poring over law books, building their case for early release, and these sham hearings, presided over by smug, good ol' boy tribunals, will have viewers shaking their fists at the screen.”³ Similarly, a *New York Times* review of the film asserted that by “conveying the humanity of prisoners lost in an unyielding system, ‘The Farm’ does for these men what they may never be able to do for themselves.”⁴

In June of 2009, the filmmakers released a follow-up to *The Farm*, titled *The Farm: 10 Down*. This second documentary explored the ways in which Angola and its inmates had changed (and remained the same) over the course of the decade between the two films.

In October of 2010, Highest Common Denominator Media Group commissioned an independent evaluation of this follow-up film. The goal of the evaluation was to assess the potential of *The Farm: 10 Down* to affect audiences, including the ways in which it might serve to educate viewers, challenge existing ideas, transform attitudes, and promote discussion of the documentary’s central themes.⁵

This report details findings from the first phase of this study. In this initial exploration, we partnered with the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York City to convene a small panel of criminal justice professionals for a film screening and structured focus group.⁶

“Prisons are opaque and need to be transparent...and [*The Farm: 10 Down*] represents and demonstrates complexity, the complexity of the lives of the people who are incarcerated.”

-FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

¹ Rotha, Paul, in collaboration with Sinclair Road and Richard Griffith. 1952. *Documentary Film: The Use of the Film Medium to Interpret Creatively and in Social Terms the Life of the People as it Exists in Reality*. 3rd ed. New York: Hastings House.

² Barsam, Richard M. 1974. *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

³ Lovell, Glenn. “The Farm: Angola USA.” *Variety* Jan 30 1998.

⁴ Maslin, Janet. “Of Life, and Death, Behind Bars.” *The New York Times* June 10, 1998

⁵ The focus group and resulting report were made possible by a generous grant from the Ford Foundation.

⁶ Special thanks are due to the center’s Director, Stephen Handelman, as well as to Cara Tabachnick, Associate Director, for their assistance in coordinating the focus group event. However, the authors take full responsibility for any and all errors or omissions in this report.

Highlights of the findings from this focus group are detailed below.

Educating Viewers

A large majority of focus group participants believe the film can serve as an educational tool.

- Fourteen out of 17 respondents (82%) felt that “This film can help educate the American public about issues related to criminal justice.”

Notable among this particular group of respondents, who are themselves criminal justice practitioners and scholars, was the perception that the film could educate criminal justice professionals.

- About two-thirds of respondents (65%, or 11 out of 17) agreed or strongly agreed that “This film can help educate criminal justice professionals about issues related to criminal justice.”

Challenging Existing Ideas

Respondents were divided between those who felt that the depiction of prison life matched their expectations and those who felt that *The Farm: 10 Down* depicted prison life as better or worse than their ideas before viewing the film.

Transforming Attitudes

“I think that one of the points of the film was to try to have the public react when it sees this and say, ‘Oh, my gosh, prisoners can be redeemed; redemption for its own sake might have some merit.’”

-FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Large majorities of respondents believed that watching the film, *The Farm: 10 Down*, had made them think differently about a number of important issues.

- For example, 12 out of 16 respondents (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* “made me more likely to think that fewer people should be in prison.”
- Similarly, 12 out of 16 respondents (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that there is prejudice against African-Americans in the criminal justice system.”

Promoting Discussion

We found compelling evidence that viewers intend to talk about the film with other people.

- No respondents disagreed with the statement, “I will discuss this film with friends/family.”
- Likewise, no respondents disagreed with the statement, “I will discuss this film with professional colleagues.”

II. INTRODUCTION

Since its premiere a decade ago, the documentary film *The Farm: Angola, USA*, directed by Jonathan Stack and Liz Garbus, has offered viewers an opportunity to examine the experiences of inmates at one of America's most notorious prisons. When it premiered in 1998, *The Farm* was received with critical acclaim and nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary feature.

In the years following the release of the original film, the filmmakers continued to document life at Angola. In June of 2009, a follow-up to the original documentary, entitled *The Farm: 10 Down*, debuted on the National Geographic channel.⁷ The new film provides an update on the subjects from the first film, as well as introducing for the first time several other individuals incarcerated in the prison.

In the fall of 2010, the filmmakers commissioned an independent evaluation of the film in order to assess audience reactions. In partnership with the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, we convened a small focus group for a screening and discussion of this follow-up documentary. Participants were recruited through email announcements sent to a targeted list of professionals, faculty, and students working in the field of criminal justice. In total, twenty people took part in the event.⁸ Only one person in attendance had seen *The Farm: 10 Down* previously, but most attendees were familiar with the original film, *The Farm*.

Participants were asked to complete a brief survey prior to viewing the film. The survey collected basic demographic information on each participant, as well as individual responses to a set of questions concerning attitudes toward and experiences with various aspects of criminal justice. Following the screening, respondents were asked to complete a second survey that repeated several questions from the pre-test, and also included questions about whether and how the film had affected their attitudes and opinions. After completing the second survey, participants engaged in a half-hour structured and moderated discussion of the film. This was followed by a brief forum with the filmmakers.

Focus Group Participants

Participants in the focus group represented a cross-section of criminal justice professionals; attendees included a high-ranking administrator of a large state correctional system, representatives of a nationally-recognized policy think tank, and the founder and director of a well-respected criminal justice advocacy organization.

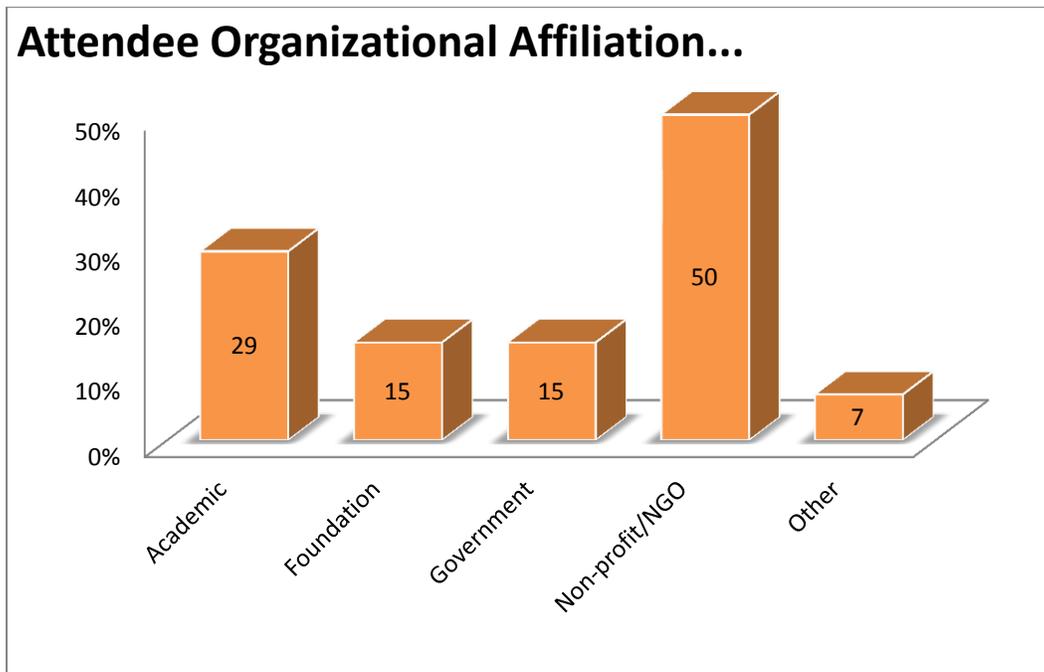
All attendees reported engaging in activities related to criminal justice in their work, the majority (69%, or 9 out of 13 respondents) through research. Other types of professional activities related to criminal justice include advocacy (31%, or 4 out of 13 respondents) and administration (23%, or 3 out of 13 respondents).⁹

⁷ The film aired with the title *A Decade Behind Bars: Return to the Farm*.

⁸ All respondents completed at least one part of the two-part survey. However, the number of respondents answering each question varies across questions. A demographic breakdown of focus group participants is provided in the appendix.

⁹ Percentages do not total to 100% due to some respondents reporting multiple types of professional activities related to criminal justice.

About half of the attendees at the focus group (50%, or 7 out of 14 respondents) work for non-profits/NGOs, while others reported working for government (15% or 2 out of 14 respondents), educational/academic institutions (29%, or 4 out of 14 respondents), foundations (15%, or 2 out of 14 respondents) and other types of organizations (7%, or 1 out of 14 respondents).¹⁰



Prior Attitudes

Several questions included on the pre-screening questionnaire were taken directly from The Sentencing Attitudes Survey, a nationally-representative survey of public attitudes, opinions, and experiences with the criminal justice system.¹¹ By drawing questions from this existing survey, we are able to compare the attitudes of focus group participants, prior to viewing the film, with the attitudes of the general public.

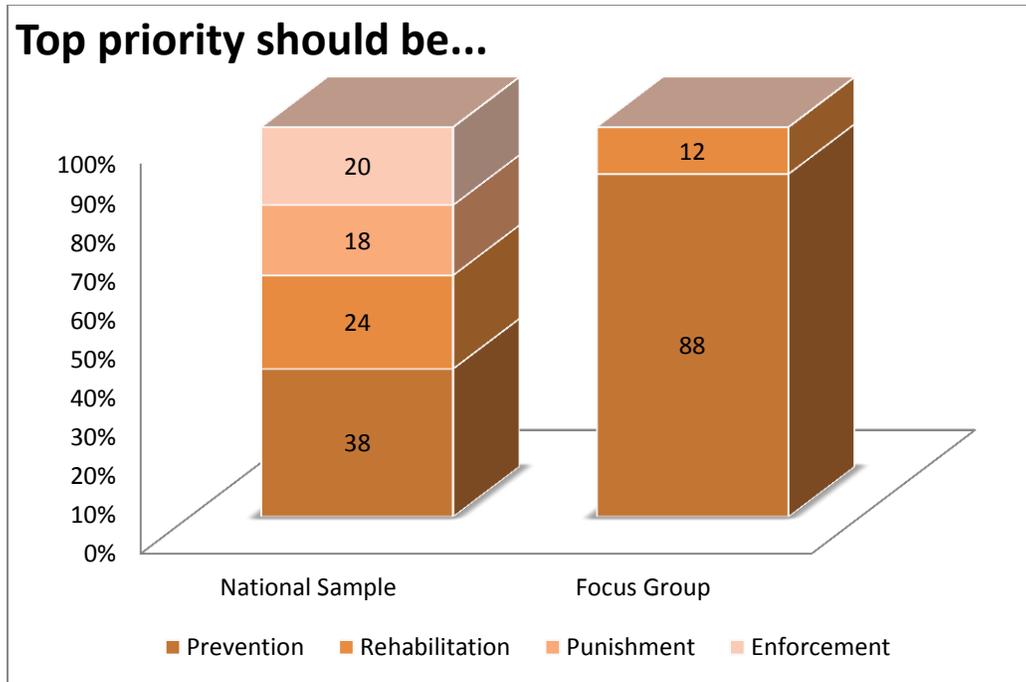
Compared to the national sample, focus group participants were less likely to favor punitive responses to crime and more likely to support alternatives to incarceration.

- Among national survey respondents, about 38% believe that the top priority for dealing with crime should be prevention and 24% think the top priority should be rehabilitation. However, fairly sizable proportions of the national public also prioritize punishment (18%) and enforcement (20%).

¹⁰ Percentages do not total to 100% due to some respondents reporting multiple types of organizational affiliations.

¹¹ The Sentencing Attitudes Survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the National Center for State Courts in 2006. The survey interviewed 1,502 adults ages 18 and older by telephone. The margin of sampling error for the total sample is plus or minus three percentage points.

- In comparison, the majority of focus group attendees (88%, or 14 out of 16 respondents) believe that prevention, such as youth education programs, should be the top priority in addressing crime, and the remaining 12% (2 out of 16 respondents) think that rehabilitation, such as job training and education for offenders, should be the top priority.



Despite being more likely than the general public to believe that the top priorities for dealing with crime should be prevention and rehabilitation, focus group participants are less likely than the general public to believe that prisons are very successful at rehabilitating offenders.

- About 65% of the national sample believes that prisons are either “not too successful” or “not at all successful” at rehabilitating offenders so they don’t commit crimes again when they leave prison.
- In comparison, a larger proportion of event attendees (94%, or 16 out of 17 respondents) believe this to be true.

Event attendees are also somewhat more likely than the general public to believe that, “given the right conditions, many offenders can turn their lives around and become law-abiding citizens.”

- Compared to 79% of the national sample, 94% of focus group participants (16 out of 17) chose this statement as best describing their own views about efforts to rehabilitate offenders, rather than the statement that “once someone turns to crime, very little can be done to turn them into productive, law-abiding citizens.”

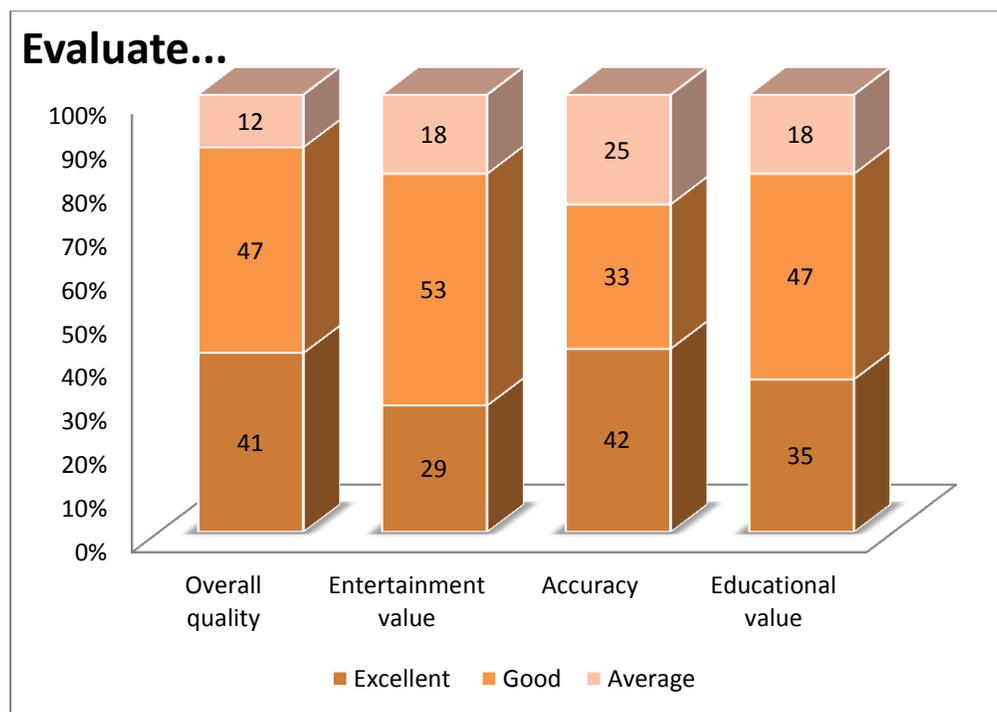
III. IMPACT

General reactions to the film, *The Farm: 10 Down*, among focus group participants were overwhelmingly positive. In particular, several respondents noted that the film was able to capture the complexity of criminal justice issues. As one respondent noted, “prisons are opaque and need to be transparent...and [in the film] you represent and demonstrate complexity, the complexity of the lives of the people who are incarcerated.”

Another respondent remarked that “stories are important to humanize people and [to show] that our practices, they’re just potentially destructive...I think stories breathe life into the complexity of these issues.”

In regards to its overall quality, entertainment value and accuracy, focus group participants consistently rated the film in the top two categories.

- In response to the question “Please evaluate the following aspects of the film...overall quality,” 15 out of 17 (88%) rated the film as being in the top two categories of “Excellent” or “Good.” The other two respondents gave it an average rating and no one gave the film a negative rating.
- In response to the question “Please evaluate the following aspects of the film...entertainment value,” 82% (14 out of 17 respondents) rated the film as either “Excellent” or “Good.” The other three respondents gave it an average rating and no one gave the film a negative rating.



A majority of viewers also rated the film as being very accurate.

- In response to the question “Please evaluate the following aspects of the film...accuracy,” 75% (9 out of 12 respondents) rated the film as either “excellent” or “good.” Three respondents gave the film a neutral rating.

However, focus group participants were somewhat more divided on the question of whether the film presented an accurate portrayal of criminal justice more broadly.

- In response to the statement “This film provides a true picture of criminal justice in Louisiana,” the largest group (46%, or 7 out of 15 respondents) gave a neutral response. Four respondents (27%) gave a response of “agree” or “strongly agree” and 4 respondents gave a response of “disagree.”
- In response to the statement “This film provides a true picture of criminal justice in America,” the largest group (44%, or 7 out of 16 respondents) gave a neutral response. Two respondents (12%) gave a response of “agree” or “strongly agree.” Six respondents (38%) gave a response of “disagree” and 1 respondent gave a response of “strongly disagree.”

Some of these responses were motivated by a sense that Angola is inherently distinctive. During the discussion following the film, many expressed their belief that the prison represents a unique correctional facility with a particular culture and history that is not representative of either the state prison system or the nation’s prisons.

One respondent noted, “I don’t think you can generalize about prisons or imprisonment or wardens from Angola.” Another concurred, suggesting that “You can’t generalize Louisiana any more than can generalize California.”

Others felt that the film told the stories of a certain segment of the men at Angola, rather than a broader picture of inmate life.

One respondent expressed his belief that, “[The film] gives a wrong view [that] people are in there, they’re in there for a long period of time, they turn their lives around when they come out, most of them are murderers when they come in and then they go out and get married, then they get married and live happily ever after, so I’m just concerned about that focus on the positive side for a very, very small number of people.”

Still others felt that some aspects of the criminal justice system as depicted in the film were quite similar to the system as they had experienced it.

In particular, the role of the parole board was seen as accurately portrayed. One respondent commented, “I thought [the parole board] was actually accurate, an accurate representation of the way the whole thing works.”

Educating Viewers

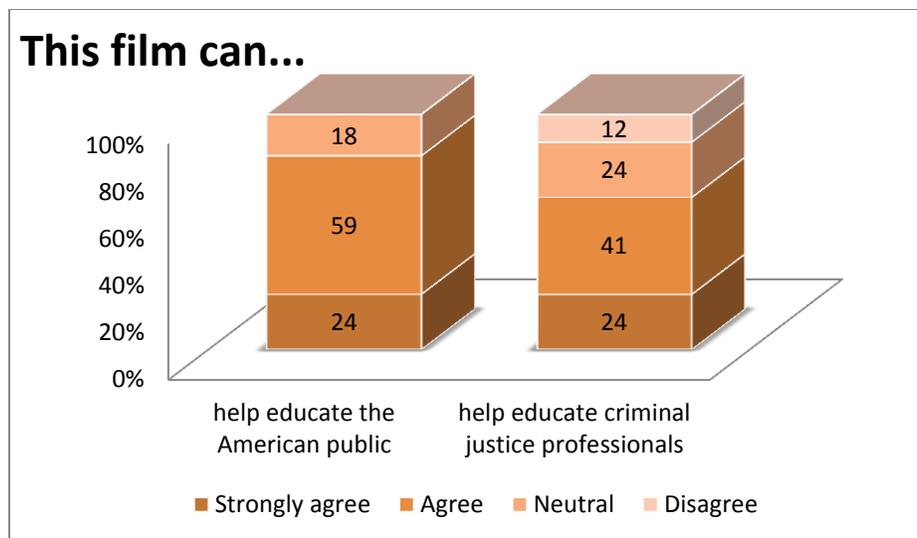
The majority of focus group participants evaluated the film, *The Farm: 10 Down*, as having significant potential to educate viewers.

- In response to the question “Please evaluate the following aspects of the film...educational value,” 82% (14 out of 17) rated the film as either “Excellent” or “Good.” Three respondents (18%) gave the film a neutral rating on this question and no one gave it a negative rating.

In particular, respondents noted that the film shed light on the kind of personal stories of rehabilitation that are rarely seen by much of the public. One respondent remarked, “I think that one of the points of the film was to try to have the public react when it sees this and say, ‘Oh, my gosh, prisoners can be redeemed; redemption for its own sake might have some merit.’ I don’t mean that in the religious way. I mean that like in someone redeeming their own life.”

A majority of respondents believed that the film could affect the attitudes of both a general audience and of individuals who work in the criminal justice sector.

- A large proportion (82%, or 14 out of 17) felt that “This film can help educate the American public about issues related to criminal justice.” The other 3 respondents (18%) were neutral and no one disagreed with this statement.



Of note among this particular group of respondents, who are themselves criminal justice practitioners and scholars, was the perception that the film has the potential to educate criminal justice professionals.

- About two-thirds of respondents (65%, or 11 out of 17) agreed or strongly agreed that “This film can help educate criminal justice professionals about issues related to criminal justice.” Four respondents (24%) were neutral on this question and 2 respondents disagreed.

Challenging Existing Ideas

Respondents were evenly divided between those who felt that prison life as depicted in the film matched their expectations and those who felt that *The Farm: 10 Down* depicted prison life as better than their ideas before viewing the film.

In response to the prompt, “We are interested in how each of these aspects of prison life as presented in the film, *The Farm: 10 Down*, compare to your perceptions of prison life before viewing the film”:

- Half of respondents (50%, or 8 out of 16) thought that “opportunities for education” were presented as “much better” or “better” in the film than their perceptions before viewing the film. The other half of respondents thought their perceptions and the depictions in the film were “about the same.”
- About half of respondents (56%, or 9 out of 16) thought that “opportunities for work” were presented as “much better” or “better” in the film than their perceptions before viewing the film. Another 38% (6 out of 16) thought their perceptions and the depictions in the film were “about the same” and 1 respondent (6%) found the depiction in the film to be “somewhat worse” than their perceptions.
- Half of respondents (50%) thought that “living conditions” were presented as “much better” or “better” in the film than their perceptions before viewing the film. Another 31% (5 out of 16) thought their perceptions and the depictions in the film were “about the same” and 3 respondents (19%) found the depiction in the film to be “somewhat worse” than their perceptions.
- Slightly less than half of respondents (44%) thought that the “difficulty of serving time in prison” was presented as “much better” or “better” in the film than their perceptions before viewing the film. The other 56% of respondents (9 out of 16) thought their perceptions and the depictions in the film were “about the same.”

Several respondents brought up specific aspects of prison life that had particular resonance with them while watching the film.

One respondent commented, “I was bothered terribly by the handcuffs and the leg cuffs and for some place that’s supposedly so nonviolent and safe, I felt that the humiliation that people endured was pretty horrific.”

Another noted, “One thing I did think the film introduced that is rare is the impact of incarceration on family members, and I was very happy to see that happen...I thought it was an important theme that this [mass incarceration] affects many others.”

Similarly, a respondent said, “I was struck that that was happening was because of the family that got created within. In some ways it was other people within that system, not correctional staff necessarily or professionals, but it seemed to me that [it was about] the relationships people had, at least that’s what I saw.”

Several others suggested additional themes that they would like to have seen appear in the film. In particular, respondents were interested in the role of drugs and the drug war in the lives of incarcerated people and in driving the incarceration trend; the role of the warden at Angola and how it compares to the warden in other prisons; the relationships between inmates and correctional officers; and whether religious programs are offered for non-Christians at Angola and in similar prison.

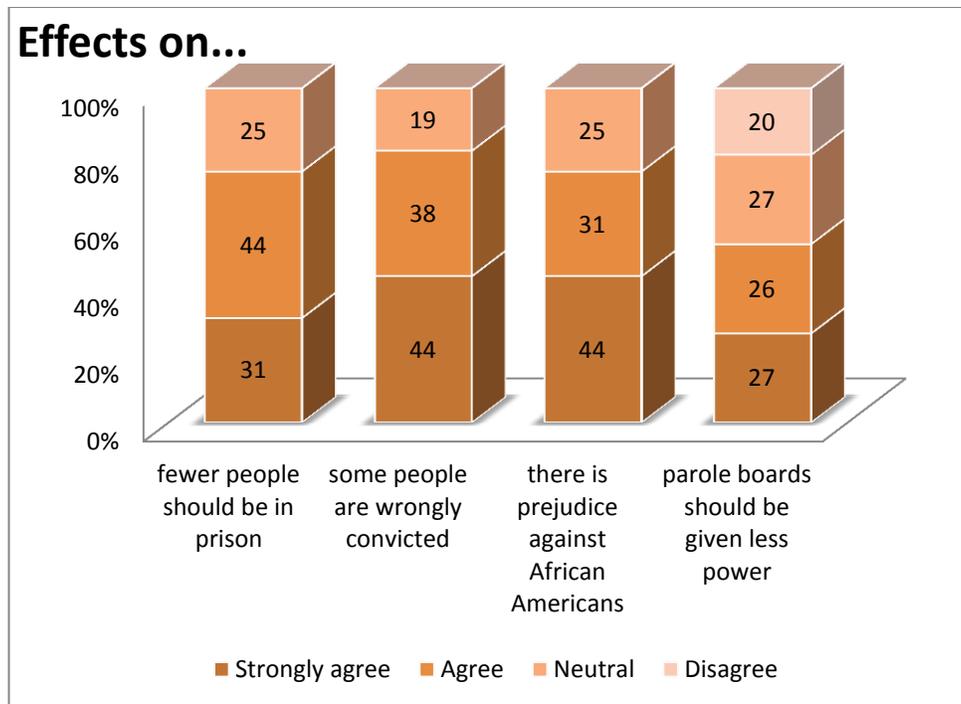
Others were interested in the types of vocational and educational programs offered in the prison and their effects on prison life.

One respondent commented, “I think that they [inmates] should be working. I think that helps promote less crime in the prison, less violence within the prison. It gives people a skill and different relationships to...other inmates, and provides a community within the prison and something that they can contribute.

Transforming Attitudes

Large majorities of respondents believed that watching the film, *The Farm: 10 Down*, had made them think differently about a number of important issues.

- Twelve out of 16 respondents (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that fewer people should be in prison.” The other 4 respondents (25%) were neutral and no one disagreed with this statement.
- Thirteen out of 16 respondents (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that “some people are wrongly convicted for the crimes for which they are in prison.” The other 3 respondents (19%) were neutral and no one disagreed with this statement.
- Twelve out of 16 respondents (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that there is prejudice against African Americans in the criminal justice system.” The other 4 respondents (25%) were neutral and no one disagreed with this statement.
 - Conversely, 13 out of 16 (81%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that “the criminal justice system does not discriminate against any racial or ethnic group.” The other 3 respondents (19%) were neutral and no one disagreed with this statement.
- In addition, 53% (8 out of 15) agreed or strongly agreed that “Watching *The Farm: 10 Down* made me more likely to think that parole boards should be given less power.” Three respondents (20%) disagreed with this statement and 4 respondents (27%) were neutral.



Respondents were somewhat more divided when asked a general question about their attitude change after watching the film.

- About a quarter of respondents (24%, or 4 out of 17 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that “This film has made me think differently about some issues related to criminal justice.” About half of respondents (53%, or 9 out of 17) were neutral on this question and another quarter (4 out of 17 respondents) disagreed.

In addition to asking respondents to assess whether and how the film had changed their attitudes, we also measure attitude change by comparing responses to three survey questions that were each asked of respondents both before and after viewing the film. On most measures, we found evidence of attitude change for at least some viewers.

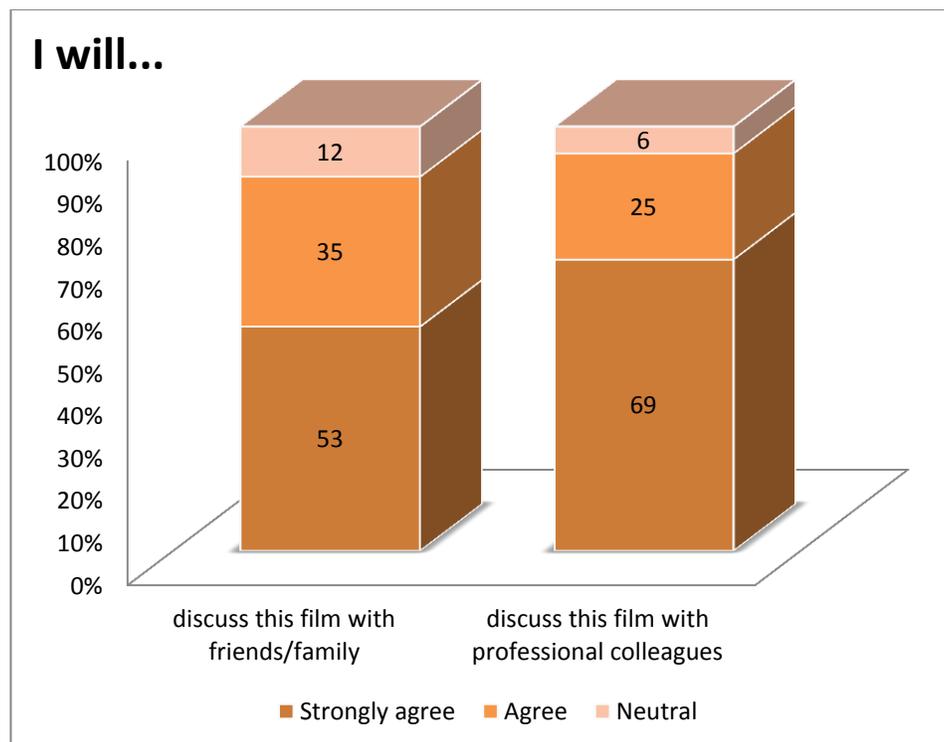
- On the question, “How successful do you think prisons are in doing each of the following? Punishing offenders and keeping them off the streets?” 4 out of 14 respondents (29%) changed their views after seeing the film. All of these respondents were more likely to believe that prisons are successful at punishing offenders after seeing the film.
- On the question, “How successful do you think prisons are in...Rehabilitating offenders, so they don’t commit crimes again when they leave prison?” 4 out of 14 respondents (29%) changed their views after seeing the film. Three respondents were more likely to believe that prisons are successful at rehabilitating offenders after seeing the film. One respondent was less likely to believe that prisons are successful at rehabilitating offenders after seeing the film.

- On the question, “Which of the following two statements best describes your own views about efforts to rehabilitate offenders? Once someone turns to crime, very little can be done to turn them into productive, law-abiding citizens? [or] Given the right conditions, many offenders can turn their lives around and become law-abiding citizens?” 1 out of 12 respondents (8%) changed his/her views, becoming more likely after viewing the film to believe that “many offenders can turn their lives around.”
- There was no change on the question of how different groups of offenders are treated in terms of the sentences they receive.

Promoting Discussion

In addition to the direct effects of the film on the attitudes and beliefs of viewers, *The Farm: 10 Down* may have indirect effects by promoting conversation around the themes and issues presented in the film. We found compelling evidence that viewers intended to discuss the film with others.

- No respondents disagreed with the statement, “I will discuss this film with friends/family. About half of respondents (53%, or 9 out of 17) strongly agreed that they will discuss this film with friends/family and an additional 35% (6 out of 17) agreed with this statement. The other two respondents (12%) were neutral toward this statement.
- No respondents disagreed with the statement, “I will discuss this film with professional colleagues.” The majority (69%, or 11 out of 16) strongly agreed that they will discuss the film with professional colleagues and an additional 25% (4 out of 16) agreed with this statement. The other respondent (6%) was neutral toward this statement.



IV. CONCLUSION

In June of 2009, *The Farm: 10 Down*, debuted on the National Geographic channel. A focus group convened in October of 2010 makes clear that this documentary has the potential to make a significant impact on audience attitudes toward inmates, prisons and correctional policy.

We find evidence that the film can serve to educate viewers, challenge existing ideas, transform attitudes, and promote discussion. The results of this focus group are of particular interest because we brought together criminal justice professionals—who have more knowledge and experience about criminal justice issues than the general public—to view and discuss the film. It is therefore especially notable that the film seemed to inform their own thinking and potentially spark discussion with their professional peers.

At the same time, this focus group provides only a small window into the likely and possible effects of the film. We hope that future research will build on this first step by measuring the response of larger groups of criminal justice professionals. Additionally, we hope that future data will allow us to examine the way that the film is received by different audiences, including incarcerated persons and their families, correctional officers and staff, criminal prosecutors and defense attorneys, and the general public.

V. APPENDIX

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Gender	
Female	67%
Male	31%
Race	
White	87%
Asian	13%
Education	
College Graduate	20%
Advanced Degree	80%
Age	
Average (years)	40
Range (years)	25-66
Political Identification	
Democrat	71%
Independent	14%
Republican	14%

Due to rounding, some percentages do not total to 100%.