

Prison-based Education: Programs, Participation and Proficiency in Literacy/Numeracy

Jinghong Cai, Anil Ruhil, and Dianne Gut

Today, more people are incarcerated in the United States than in past decades, and we have the infamous distinction of being the nation that leads in incarceration rates (670 per 100,000 persons as per Walmsley 2018). Although an increasing body of research shows that correctional education works in terms of enhancing post-release employability and reducing recidivism, there is a paucity of literature that identifies the educational programs that benefit inmates the most vis-à-vis developing the literacy/numeracy skills needed for reentry into an ever-changing labor market. Identifying the type, amount and intensity of programs that reduce recidivism is not a choice, it is a critical path to reducing recidivism.

Given this need our study focuses on 3Ps – prison-based education programs, prisoners' participation in academic/vocational programs, and their proficiency in literacy and numeracy as assessed during their incarceration by the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Incarcerated Adults in 2014.

Our investigation spans the following broadly defined questions –

- 1) How do inmates differ from the household population in the use of literacy/numeracy skills in life and at work?
- 2) How do participants in different types of prison-based educational programs (such as basic skills, General Equivalency Degree (GED), employment readiness and job training) reflect literacy and numeracy proficiency? That is, does proficiency vary by program?
- 3) Do inmates who participate in prison-based academic and/or vocational programs use more literacy and numeracy skills in their prison life, compared with non-participants?

Our study identified three types of prison-based programs that serve inmates who possess a range of literacy and numeracy levels – (i) programs targeting basic skills serve inmates without a GED or high school diplomas; (ii) programs that help inmates obtain a GED or high school diplomas that equip inmates with necessary proficiency in literacy and numeracy to pursue appropriate job training programs/postsecondary education, and; (iii) vocational/professional training programs that advance skills in areas such as computers, mechanics and technology.

What we found –

- Compared with the household population, a large proportion of inmates rarely use certain literacy/numeracy skills (e.g., reading bills, invoices and financial statements, reading diagrams, maps and schematics, filling in forms and writing reports at prison jobs) in life or work during incarceration, particularly when it comes to numeracy.
- Inmates who did not reach high school level and did not participate in any programs had the lowest literacy and numeracy. By contrast, inmates who participated in basic skills programs performed significantly higher than this reference group in both literacy and numeracy.
- Over two-thirds of inmates who participated in vocational programs (i.e. employment readiness and/or job training) had a high school diploma, and participants in vocational programs during incarceration were likely to use more literacy and numeracy skills in their prison life than the non-participants.

We recommend that policy makers consider the valuable link we found between skills-use and participation in vocational programs or career and technical education (CTE). From the perspective of need-based education, expanding programs targeting basic skills is a must, as almost one in three inmates have education levels lower than high school diploma. Since evidence shows that educational programs in prison benefit inmates on improving skills, CTE should receive more resources precisely because these programs lead not only to obtaining but also retaining employment, which is a critical policy lever if we truly wish to reduce recidivism.