

Understanding Educational Aspiration among People in Prison

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Summary of the Research: This paper aims to assess the role that cognitive skills, as well as demographic and socio-economic factors play in shaping educational aspirations among people in prison. This paper pursues this objective through two research questions using two different analytic strategies.

Research Question 1: What demographic and skill-level factors predict the aspiration to enroll in *any* education class or program among people in prison in the U.S.?

- **Binary logistic regression:** gender, age, race/ethnicity, parental education attainment, personal educational attainment, literacy proficiency score, numeracy proficiency score.
- **Findings:** Having stronger literacy or numeracy skills may increase a person's interest in educational programs – these skills are dynamic and can change with skill-building programs

Research Question 2: What demographic and skill-level factors predict the aspiration to enroll in a *postsecondary* education class or program among people in prison in the U.S.?

- **Chi-square:** gender, age, race/ethnicity, parental education attainment, personal educational attainment.
- **Findings:** Those interested in postsecondary education had higher average literacy and numeracy skill scores than those interested in other types of educational programs; a large majority of all but one category (those without high school credentials) were interested in postsecondary programs (75-99 percent).

Policy/Practice Implications: One of the most important findings is actually within the summary statistics: the fact that 70 percent of people in prison would like to enroll in an education program.

- Aspirations in prison outstrip opportunities: High school is the highest level of educational programming that is consistently available in prison.
- Among incarcerated people, educational attainment may not be as strong a predictor of interest in education as assessed cognitive skill. This suggests skill-building may spur more interest for more schooling.
- Skill-building could be accomplished through offering challenging adult basic education courses and college preparatory work even where college programs do not yet exist.
- The opportunity this interest presents to engage incarcerated people in adult learning programs should not be ignored. About 95 percent of incarcerated people will eventually leave prison and return home.

Conclusion: 2.2 million people may further their educations while incarcerated in the United States. Educators, researchers, policymakers, and funding agencies should begin to look at prisons as a legitimate and important site of learning in American society.