

Factors That Influence the Educational Attainment, Employment, Economic Mobility, and Successful Reentry of Incarcerated Parents

Daniel M. Leeds, Juliana Pearson, Leslie Scott, and Simone Robers

Introduction:

Many prison inmates returning to their communities are parents. Parental incarceration is associated with poor outcomes for children, including lower family incomes and a higher risk of child homelessness, aggressive behavior, depression, and poor academic achievement. Children with parents in prison are six times more likely to be incarcerated than the overall population. Correctional education may help previously incarcerated adults and their children because prison inmates have lower levels of education (and underlying literacy and numeracy skills) than the U.S. population, all of which are correlated with poor life outcomes.

PIAAC's background questionnaire provides an opportunity to learn about incarcerated parents' pre-incarceration education levels and employment, current skill levels, and factors that influence enrollment in and access to educational programming in prison.

Findings:

PIAAC data on incarcerated parents demonstrate a clear need for them to build their skills so that they can access employment opportunities upon release. More than three-quarters of incarcerated parents with a child under the age of 18 (dependent children) have low literacy and numeracy skills. The majority have completed a high school diploma or alternative credential and many have been employed for a clear majority of their potential working years, but very few possess a postsecondary credential. Incarcerated parents of dependent children differ from other incarcerated individuals, though not always in ways that lead to a clear narrative. They are less likely to be interested in tertiary degrees or courses than other incarcerated individuals. They have often been employed for a greater share of their potential working years than incarcerated individuals who do not have children. They are more likely to be interested in job opportunities upon release than individuals with grown children. Incarcerated adults had disproportionately low-educated parents and were disproportionately low-educated themselves, so additional education may help prevent this cycle of low education from continuing into the future. Given the potential gains from further education, it is surprising that roughly a quarter of incarcerated parents of dependent children were not interested in academic courses. Moreover, over half of those uninterested in academic coursework and close to 40 percent of those uninterested in job skill courses did not provide clear reasons; therefore, further research is needed to determine demand-side barriers to prison education. Such research could also focus on how reasons for not participating in career-focused programs differs from reasons for not participating in academic correctional education programs.

Policy/Theory Implications:

Our hope is that this analysis can strengthen policymakers' understanding of the education, skills, and job readiness of incarcerated parents returning to their communities. State policymakers can use the information to inform investment in education, training, reentry, and supplemental support programs for justice-involved populations during and after incarceration. The study could also inform the reauthorization of the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Second Chance Act, both of which provide resources to fund educational programs in prison settings.