

Assessing the Reading Levels of Incarcerated Adults for Educational Programming

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Providing educational opportunities for adults who are incarcerated is important not only for the society we live in but also for the self-esteem of the adults who participate in them. Educational opportunities in local jails and prisons help adults establish and clarify goals and give them hope upon release. Interestingly, the first recorded educational program for adults incarcerated in a county jail was in 1789 at Philadelphia's Walnut Street jail. For the first one hundred years, the instructors were pastors who taught their inmates how to read the Bible (Moeller, Day and Rivera, 2004). Their study reports that educational programs in correctional settings have expanded to all states and include the following: Adult Basic Education, General Educational Development (GED), Life Skills, Special Education, English as a Second Language, and vocational and college classes. Even though local jails offer educational programs, research shows that participation is very low (Harlow, 2003). According to Rankin(2005) prison illiteracy is a serious problem because 50 % of incarcerated adults are at the sixth grade literacy level. Vacca (2004) contends that educational programs for incarcerated adults not only provide much needed literacy instruction, but also a necessary reinforcement when they are released to society. Also, adults who address their educational needs while incarcerated are less likely to have challenges when released such as housing, health care, family stability and drug treatment (Goebel,2005).

Assessing the literacy levels of inmates can give institutions like jails and prisons important information to create new educational experiences that will increase job opportunities upon their release. The purpose of this study was to identify reading levels of male and female adults incarcerated in a U. S. county jail to assist educational institutions and jail administrators in creating new educational programs to meet the literacy needs in their facility. Also to understand the value of such programs, students participating in a current GED program in the jail were interviewed to capture their opinions and beliefs.

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to a report on U.S. Adult Literacy Programs 46.5 % of incarcerated adults do not have high school diplomas (National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), 2007). The report further states that studies have shown that the average reading level of adults who are incarcerated is very low: below 5th grade in one study and below eighth grade in another. Additionally, the NCES report states that an alarming 67 % of those incarcerated cannot write a brief letter explaining a billing error, read a map, or understand a bus schedule. Gaes (2008) states that incarcerated adults are an undereducated population and have lower literacy skills to complete everyday tasks compared to the broader community. As correctional facilities continue to grow, it is a basic understanding that the education of adults housed in these facilities, specifically in literacy skills, is a link to a better life (Moeller et al. 2004). Vacca (2003) concludes that literacy skills may be the answer to the high cost of incarceration as our correctional facilities and prisons become overcrowded with first time and repeat offenders.

Education Programs in Correctional Facilities

The New Jersey Department of Corrections (DOC) believes that education for adults is an important element in successful re-entry into society (Johnson, 2004). All of their 14 correctional facilities include educational programs based on the needs of the adults who are housed in them.

Two interrelated factors that impact all of their education programs are the population of incarcerated adults and the length of their stay. According to Johnson participants in the programs have much in common, with the most obvious significant factor being incarceration. Other commonalities include a “wide discrepancy between chronological age and grade level expectations, and a very low motivation level” (p. 92). Instruction at the New Jersey DOC is individualized to teach, re-teach, and assess the learner. Without the necessary education, 25% of these adults will be rearrested after six months and 40% within one year. Johnson also states that the ultimate goal of educational programs in the New Jersey DOC is to lower recidivism and improve the quality of life of the incarcerated adult upon release.

In a study of a county jail, Albers (2006) reports a successful partnership between the Harris County Sheriff’s Office in Houston, Texas and Houston Community College (HCC). The HCC has a comprehensive educational system that focuses on training incarcerated adults for entry-level jobs. The program has been in existence for almost 40 years and enrolled 4,200 adults in 2005. Even though no statistical percentages were shared in this study, the philosophy of the program is that incarcerated adults who take advantage of the educational opportunities can reenter society as productive citizens and, inevitably, this will result in a reduction of recidivism. The HCC provides vocational job training, literacy, and GED classes to adults in county jail facilities.

There are, of course, noted barriers to educational programs for incarcerated adults: these include lack of funding, offender eligibility, conflicting administrative priorities, poor academic skills, and lack of support from policymakers and the public (Diverse, 2005). Meyer, Fredericks, Borden & Richardson (2010) found other challenges including the lack of available quiet space to study, cancellation of classes, and limited cooperation from directors and staff at the correctional facility. There are other factors that work in direct opposition to educational programs in correctional facilities as well: security of the incarcerated adults and teachers while in class, transporting the participants to and from class, and lockdowns canceling classes. Also, according to Johnson (2004), educational programs can be seen as revolving doors as incarcerated adults enter and exit programs due to court dates, transfers, reassignments, and a host of other reasons. Despite these barriers, the NCES (2007) concluded that correctional education programs are more cost-effective than adding buildings or beds. These programs are a necessary part of the effort to decrease crime because adults who complete an educational program have the lowest recidivism rates (Moeller et al., 2004).

Benefits of Educational Programs to Incarcerated Adults

The research supports the inverse relationship between education and recidivism in correctional facilities. Nuttall, Hollmen and Staley (2003) report that incarcerated adults who participate in any educational program (Adult Basic Education [ABE], General Educational Development [GED], or postsecondary classes) are less likely to return to prison than incarcerated adults who do not participate. In a study of career and technical education in United States prisons, Ward (2009) states that these programs lower recidivism rates, lower parole revocation rates, decrease disciplinary actions during incarceration, and increase employment rates upon release. Additionally, Jake Cronin, policy analyst at the Institute on Public Policy at the University of Missouri, found that the Missouri Department of Corrections’ \$10 million yearly expenditure on resources for adult GED completion saved the state \$20 million a year by reducing recidivism (Machetta, 2011). Moeller et al. (2004) assert that, “in general, adult correctional education programs have been deemed necessary in the battle against crime” (p. 43). Also cited in their study was an extensive analysis and evaluation of education upon recidivism by Cecil, Drapkin, Hickman, and Mackenzie. These researchers found that adults who completed an educational program and those who received postsecondary education had the lowest recidivism rates. In addition, Bazos & Hausman cited a study by the Correctional Education Association involving three states (Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio). The study compared the re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarcerations rates of correctional education participants to non-participants. They reported an average of 19.7 percent reduction in recidivism rates for those who participated in education programs (Moeller et al., 2004).

Meyer et al. (2010) associate not only reduced recidivism but also increased feelings of self-worth of the adults participating in an educational program. Relationships with staff and peers also

improved, resulting in improved conditions in correctional facilities. In a similar study, Vacca (2004) reports educational programs that are well-attended lead “to a more humane and tolerable environment in which to live and work, not only for the inmates but also for the [correctional] officers, staff and everyone else” (p. 298). In addition, Chappell makes the case that educational programs in correctional facilities are cost effective and economically beneficial to the community (Hall & Killacky, 2008)). Participation in programs like the GED can affect the labor market by increasing the skills of the adults (human capital) or by indicating to potential employers that they are better candidates for jobs than those without high school diplomas or a GED (Gaes, 2008).

Education can play a central role in giving incarcerated adults the dignity and respect that institutions like jails and prisons take away by providing a sense of purpose and a desire to become responsible citizens upon release (Behan, 2008)). Warner (2007) states that correctional facilities -- by their very nature -- can damage people, and educational programs can reduce that damage by giving offenders hope and the ability to cope with their sentences. The National Institute for Literacy concludes that educational programs are an effective form of crime prevention. As educational skills increase, so does the chance that an inmate will not return to prison. Shobe (2003) surveyed inmates at a school inside a central Indiana Correctional Facility. He quotes an offender: “Being incarcerated has been a good experience for me. It has given me the desire to go to school” (p. 62). Correctional education programs might be the last chance for offenders who may not attend programs like the GED or vocational classes on the outside.

2. METHOD

A mixed method research approach was used in this study to establish the reading levels of incarcerated adults and to understand the value of educational programs from those participating in a GED program. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The researcher used a sequential explanatory strategy collecting and analyzing the quantitative data first and then collecting and analyzing the qualitative data last (Creswell, 2003). Human subjects approval was obtained from the researcher’s affiliated university’s Institutional Review Board before data was collected. All participants signed a confidentiality waiver.

Site of Study

The county jail where this study took place is located in an average size metropolitan area in the United States. The city has a total crime rate twice the national average and two-thirds larger than the rest of the state. According to the Chief of Programming for the County Sheriff’s Office, the average population on any given day of incarcerated adults in the jail is 1000 males and 200 females. The jail offers GED classes for both male and female adults inside the jail in collaboration with the State Division of Adult Education. The program has grown rapidly since its inception in 2006, with a total of 313 GED graduates. The jail has a recidivism rate of 46% for the last three years for adults who did not participate in the GED program. For adults who graduated from the GED program, recidivism has been reduced to 18% with only fifty-seven of the 313 GED graduates re-incarcerated within 3 years upon release. According to the Supervisor of the GED program in the jail, the county has saved an estimated \$2,304,000 in the last 6 years, based on the average stay and cost for an inmates’ incarceration.

In an effort to continue to reduce recidivism and meet the educational needs of the adults incarcerated in the jail, the Chief of Programming asked for assistance in setting up educational programs that would increase reading skills and/or provide inmates with a skill set that could transfer to employment upon release. Since no educational information is required of those incarcerated in this facility, educational levels of adults housed in the facility are unknown unless they register for GED classes. Adults who choose to participate in the GED program are given the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to identify reading and math levels. Knowing the reading levels of the incarcerated adults who are not in the GED program and understanding the value of the GED program of the adults participating would assist the Chief of Programming in planning appropriate educational programs and library services.

Participants

There were a total of 175 participants (102 males and 73 females) who volunteered for the reading assessment. Twenty GED participants (16 males and 4 females) volunteered to be

interviewed about their beliefs about the program. All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality for their participation and also of the resulting test scores and interview notes.

Materials

Because of the simplicity and short amount of time it takes to administer this test, The Slosson Oral Reading Test-Revised (SORT-R3) was used to assess inmates' reading levels. The test is not diagnostic in nature and is a quick assessment of word recognition and oral reading skills. Confidence intervals have been established for both grade and age levels and promise 95% or 99% certainty that the examinees true SORT-R3 scores falls within these ranges. The validity correlates (.90 or greater) with the Peabody Individual Achievement Test and the WoodcockJohnson Test of Achievement. The SORT-R3 contains 200 words that are grouped into lists of 20 words each and arranged by level of difficulty from the easiest to the most difficult. Each group approximates a grade's reading level (Slosson, 2008)). Results are indicated in grade equivalent (GE) scores giving an approximate achievement level. "The GE is determined from the mean of raw scores of the norming group at that grade and month level" (Slosson, 2008, p.4).

Procedure for Administering the Reading Test

The participants volunteered for the research study and no rewards or other incentives were given for participating. Incarcerated adults in minimum and medium security pods were informed of the research study and its purpose by an announcement from the Chief of Programming the day before the testing. They were told that the purpose of the study was to obtain reading levels for educational programming purposes. They were advised that the study was strictly voluntary and that all test scores would remain anonymous and confidential. GED students were in class during the testing, so no GED students were assessed. The researcher and four research associates (proctors) administered the SORT-R3. In an effort to make sure scoring of the participants was consistent, proctors were trained by the researcher before the testing began. On the day of testing a designated officer announced the research study to the adults in each pod, and those volunteering to be a part of the study stood in line to be tested. The researcher and proctors werelocated in small rooms visible only to the officers off each pod and tested each participant individually. The researcher and proctors began by thanking participants for volunteering, introducing themselves by first name, outlining the procedure of the test, and asking if they had any questions. This was in accordance with the guidelines on the SORT-R3 that proctors "establish rapport with the subject to obtain the best performance possible" (Slosson, p.1). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized to analyze the test scores of the participants. Descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1 and the distribution of scores is shown in Figure 1.

Procedure for the Interviews

Students in the GED classroom were asked to participate in the study by the researcher in their GED class. The researcher told the GED students that they would be asked three questions and that their responses would be confidential and no names would be used. They were told the results would help the county jail in making decisions on what educational programs and services to offer. GED participants were interviewed in a small room outside the GED room surrounded by glass and visually monitored by the jail officers. Participants were reminded again of anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews lasted 10-15 minutes and were recorded in a notebook by the researcher, since recording was not allowed inside the jail. Sixteen male participants and four female participants volunteered to take part in the study. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. What motivated you to participate in the GED program?
2. What would you change (if anything) about the program?
3. Does participating in an educational program make you feel any different about yourself?

3. RESULTS OF THE READING ASSESSMENT

The descriptive results indicate that as many as 40% of the tested offenders scored very high (mode grade level was above 12.5, the ceiling score) on the SORT-R3 assessment. The median score for the incarcerated adults was 11.5 for both males and females (Table 1). The mean or

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average grade equivalent (10.2 overall) in this study does not present a clear picture of the distribution of the scores. Figure 1 shows how the scores were distributed, with most offenders scoring at the 12.5 grade level equivalent. Overall, the results of this study indicated that the majority of tested offenders had literacy skills that ranged between 10th and 12th grades which would make them good candidates for the GED program if they did not have a high school diploma. Thirty-two percent of those tested had reading levels between 7th grade and 9th grades, and a very small percent (4.6) had literacy levels below 6th grade. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyze the differences between the scores of male and female offenders. There was no significant statistical difference ($p=.605$).

Table 1. Summary of SORT-R3 scores

	Overall	Females (N=73)	Males (N=102)
Mean grade level equivalent	10.2	10.4	10.1
Standard Deviation	2.6	2.3	2.7
Median grade level equivalent	11.5	11.5	11.3
Cumulative percentage of participants scoring at grade level equivalent 6 th grade or less	4.6%	2.7%	5.9%
Cumulative percentage of participants scoring at grade level equivalent 9 th grade or less	32.0%	31.5%	32.4%

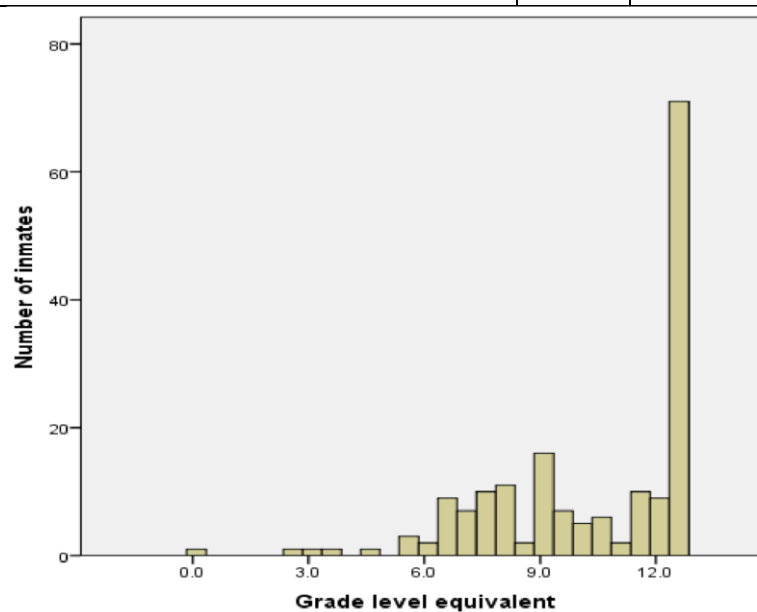


Figure 1. Grade level equivalent distribution

4. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

GED participants felt the need for change in their lives concerning a job or education when asked what motivated them to participate in the GED program. Most participants said “get a job” or “further their education” was the motivating force that got them to enroll in the program. A few

felt the need to “set goals for their life.” However, some were more specific with the following comments:

- *Stop the way I am living.*
- *I've been unemployed for 2 years and am living with my mother.*
- *Get out of the projects.*
- *For the bonus of 30 days off my sentence*
- *I want to go back on all the mistakes I have made*

When asked what they would change (if anything) about the GED program a third of the participants responded they wouldn't change anything and said that it was a good program. Others had some other suggestions:

- *Increase the days offered per week.*
- *More one on one (2).*
- *Larger enrollment to increase interactions of students (2).*
- *Smaller classes*
- *More books. I'm really fast at it—I would like more work.*
- *More work on computers (4)*

Some participants suggested literacy, typing and creative writing classes should be added to the current program.

When asking the participants if they feel any differently about themselves since participating in the program the responses were upbeat and positive. Most of the male participants in the study said that participating in the GED program made them feel better about themselves. Other male participants said the following:

- *Makes me feel better for myself. Gives me more incentive to do something—to get out of here and get a better job.*
- *Going to the GED class changed my mood. I have a better attitude about going and applying myself,*
- *I'm more motivated and get in trouble less. I feel I have more opportunities.*
- *I am happy. Happier than I have been for a long time.*

The female participants also commented that participating in the program made them feel better about themselves. One said, “I don't feel a lesser person, I feel like an individual—not just an inmate.” Another said, “I believe I have a lot of potential,” while another said, “It is something to look forward to instead of being down on yourself.”

5. DISCUSSION

The results in Table 1 suggest that many of the adults in this study (N=175) would benefit from a program designed for fluent readers, such as the GED or some type of vocational or postsecondary educational program. These findings are consistent with a similar study conducted at the Lake County Indiana Jail that found the average grade equivalency for reading literacy of offenders was 11th grade (Shutay, Plebanski and McCafferty, 2010). In addition, more sophisticated measures of reading comprehension could shed more light on the overall reading performance levels of the participants. Since the incarcerated adults were told the purpose of the study was to obtain reading levels, those adults with low or basic literacy skills or English language learners might have been the majority of those who chose not to volunteer. Individuals with the most need might have been reluctant to undergo the assessments and to join a class because of low self-esteem, lack of motivation or negative past associations with educational assessments. Because the jail requires no academic information from its incarcerated adults, it was also not known which participants had high school diplomas or postsecondary degrees. However, some participants readily gave the information during the testing. One older participant told his proctor “he didn't have much schoolin'.” Other participants talked about being expelled from school or dropping out to help support their families. There were several participants who reported

college degrees. This study showed that many of the offenders tested would benefit from postsecondary or job-specific training programs to increase their chances for employment upon release and to decrease their chances of re-incarceration. The Chief of Programming stated before the testing began that he had witnessed adults who could not read a letter from a friend or family member. Additionally, according to the GED supervisor, some adults scored too low on the TABE to be able to enroll in the GED class. With this in mind, correctional facilities like county jails and prisons need to consider all levels of educational programs from Adult Basic Education classes that target adults at the lowest reading levels to postsecondary and vocational opportunities for those with a high school diploma or GED certificate.

In this study the participants in the GED program valued the program and were focused upon their release. Whether it was to get a job or further their education, the participants of the GED program wanted to better themselves for their future. This correlates with Behan's (2008) finding that education in institutions like jails can give incarcerated adults a sense of purpose and desire to become good citizens when released. Some were able to look at their lives and reevaluate it while incarcerated. Most GED participants were satisfied with the current program, but some wanted more; either more days per week, more one-on-one, more computer work or even an addition of more classes like literacy and creative writing. All GED participants felt better about themselves since they had enrolled in the program. Feelings of self-worth and being proud of their educational accomplishments were apparent in the interviews. This is consistent with the study by Meyer et al. (2004) who found that incarcerated adults had increased feelings of self-worth. They talked about who they would send a copy of their GED certificate to and how they would be prepared for a better job. Some talked about starting or returning to college for a career in architecture, culinary arts and construction. Regret about the past also surfaced during the interviews. One female discussed her alcohol addiction and the need to stay away from liquor stores while a male stated that he had been on the path of drugs and alcohol. Another regretted quitting school while another talked about needing to be a responsible dad to his four children.

6. CONCLUSION

Educational programs in correctional facilities and efforts to expand them are often controversial and costly. Rooms for classes may not be readily accessible or secure for inmates. Materials and resources can also be difficult to obtain for education programs in correctional facilities. Warner (2007) reports negative counter influences such as inhumane conditions, humiliation by staff and alienation from society. He goes on to say that correctional facilities, by their very nature, can damage offenders and it is through participation in an educational program that can help reduce the damage. Dr. John Garmon, a longtime advocate of educational programs in correctional facilities, says that any educational program offered decreases the chance that offenders will return to prison or jail (Boulard, 2005). According to the NCES educational programs are more cost effective than building new facilities. Vacca (2004) reports inmates who attend classes to help them read and write are less likely to be re-incarcerated. Creating educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals can save millions of dollars to taxpayers by reducing recidivism and giving incarcerated adults hope for gainful employment upon release. Education can be a person's link to a better life and the lack of education, although it does not cause crime, is related to a life of crime (Moeller et al., 2004). The county jail in this study believes in educational reform for its incarcerated adults. They have found that offering educational opportunities is not only a win/win situation for taxpayers but also for the adults housed in their jail. Adults in the jail GED program have a recidivism rate of 18% compared to 46% of those offenders not participating. According to the Chief of Programming, there has never been a discipline problem during a GED class. This supports the research by Franklin (2000) who reported that there was never one violation of security in eleven years in an educational program in the Washington State Reformatory. In another study Gerber & Fritsch, report that there was a reduction of criminal behavior and fewer disciplinary problems in offenders who attended an educational program while incarcerated (Vacca 2004).

Adult preparation programs are often overlooked even though it impacts jobs and the economy (National Coalition for Literacy). It is an economic investment to create educational programs in correction facilities to motivate incarcerated adults to achieve at higher academic levels than when they became incarcerated. The National Coalition for Literacy estimates that a high school

diploma or GED could amount to more than \$250,000 per graduate in lifetime earnings including payment of payroll to federal and state taxes. To satisfy those who demand that society must “get tough on crime,” offenders are punished for their crimes by being locked up in a correctional facility; at the same time, they are being provided educational opportunities to increase their chances of success upon release. In this setting, the jail is seeing great success in a small GED program, success measured not only in offenders who never return to jail and become productive citizens, but also in saving thousands of dollars for the county. As educational programs are added to meet the needs of incarcerated adults, recidivism will certainly continue to decrease and thousands -- if not millions --of taxpayer dollars will be saved for this community.

In planning educational programs for incarcerated adults, correctional institutions need to take into account a possible wide discrepancy in educational and literacy levels of inmates within the same facility. Offering Adult Basic Education, GED, vocational, and postsecondary classes would give offenders the opportunity to expand their skills and enhance employability upon release. The county jail in this study, after seeing the results of the reading scores of the adults participating, have already set a plan into motion. A resource from their community has donated 3000 library books for the growth and development of the incarcerated adults. Also, the Chief of Programming is working with a community literacy resource group to develop a “What’s Next” post GED program to meet the educational needs of those incarcerated adults who desire more educational options to increase the likelihood of success upon release.

In order to meet the President’s goal of having the largest adult completion rate of post-secondary education in the world by 2020, we must begin offering educational programs and enlisting those adults who have not completed college (National Coalition for Literacy). The NCL goes on to say that many of these adults will need refresher courses to get back into education. Correctional facilities are a logical place to offer postsecondary and vocational programs, GED certification and refresher courses because incentives can be offered to individuals for lower sentences upon completion of a designated program. Also, as incarcerated adults can have hope for their future as they learn new skills that can benefit their community upon release.

Education can play an important role in giving back confidence and dignity to incarcerated adults. Attending classes and learning new skills can take away the idleness and low motivation that incarceration often brings. Charles Dickens said in his visit to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1842, “In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane and meant for reformation,” but in spite of the well-meaning goals of prison administrators, it “wears the mind into a moribund state, which renders it unfit for the rough contact and busy action of the world” (Behan, 2008, p. 157). Educational programs are important in the effort to fight the hopelessness of institutional incarceration. The goal of such programs ultimately is not only to improve the quality of life for incarcerated adults by meeting their educational needs but also providing opportunities for success in a job or career that will deter re-incarceration.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study conducted in a correctional facility are several. The data are specific to this particular setting, and may be difficult to generalize to other institutional populations. In addition, the study is limited by the reading constructs (essentially, only word recognition) measured by the SORT-R3. The study is also limited by the fact that the only incarcerated adults tested were those who volunteered to participate and who may not be representative of the entire jail population. Finally, students in the GED program were not assessed because they were in class at the time of the testing.

Implications for Future Research

This study added to the research on the reading levels of incarcerated adults and how participants valued a GED program. Questions that this study brought to light were the following.

- How many incarcerated adults have post-secondary education or certificates?
- Has the reading level of incarcerated adults increased in the last 10-20 years?
- What are the K-12 educational experiences of incarcerated adults?

What motivates incarcerated adults to participate in an educational program? Answers to these questions might help institutions set up educational and work readiness programs to help incarcerated adults be successful in life upon release. The knowledge that many incarcerated adults have the ability to change and be productive citizens may help in the fight for more programs in penal institutions.

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