

Understanding Interest in Education Programs among People in Prison

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The Vera Institute of Justice

Mission

To build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities.

How We Work

Vera works in partnership with local, state, and national government officials to create change from within.

- **We study problems** that impede human dignity and justice.
- **We pilot solutions** that are at once transformative and achievable.
- **We engage diverse communities** in informed debate.
- **We harness the power of evidence** to drive effective policy and practice.

Vera & Postsecondary Education in Prison

- Vera is working to make higher education available to more people in prison and after release through:
 - Facilitating the implementation and scaling up of quality higher education programs in prisons and those that work with students after they return home,
 - Removing policy barriers to access to higher education during or after prison through a strategic communications and policy advocacy campaign,
 - Conducting research that illuminates the experiences of people in prison and after release in relation to postsecondary education

The Research

Summary of the Research

This paper examines **educational aspiration** among people in prison, specifically the role that cognitive skills and demographic and socio-economic factors play in shaping interest in education programs

Important Terms

- **Educational attainment:** the educational milestones a student has completed, such as 10th grade, a high school diploma, or a Bachelor's degree
- **Achievement:** grade point averages, measured cognitive skills, test scores
- **Aspiration:** the highest degree or credential the student hopes to complete

Literature Review

- **Criminological research:** education is associated with reductions in recidivism, violence in prison, increases in employment
- **Education research:** black/white achievement gap, wealth gap, education as the means for social mobility
- **Prison education research:** prison affects cognitive ability, incarcerated GED holders have strong literacy skills, achievement measures may predict educational aspiration

Research Questions

RQ1: 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.?

RQ2: 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.?

Data & Methodology

Data & Research Sample

Data Source: 2014 PIAAC Prison Study's Public Use Files

RQ1 Sample: N=1,190

Do you want to enroll in an academic class or program of study? [*P_Q060*]

- Statistical Technique: Binary Logistic Regression (4 models)

RQ2 Sample: N= 822

Which one of the following degree or certificate programs would you like to enroll in? [*P_Q080*]

- Statistical Technique: Binary Logistic Regression (intended);
Chi-Square Test of Association (actual)

Data: RQ1 & 2 Variables

| | Variables (# of categories) | RQ1 Reference Groups |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| RQ1 Dependent Variable | Desire to enroll in an academic class or program of study [P_Q060] (2) | n/a |
| RQ2 Dependent Variable | Desire to enroll in at least a postsecondary level class or program of study (2, collapsed) [P_Q080] | n/a |
| Co-Variates <i>Dummy-coded</i> | Gender (2) [GENDER_R] | Male |
| | Age Group (5, collapsed) [AGE10FLSEXT] | 25-34 years old |
| | Racial Group (4) [RACETHN_4CAT] | White |
| | Personal Educational Attainment Level (3) [EDCAT6] | Beyond H.S. degree/equivalent |
| | Parental Educational Attainment Level (4) [PARED] | At least one parent completed a postsecondary degree |
| Independent Variables | Literacy Plausible Values [PVLIT1-PVLIT10] | n/a |
| | Numeracy Plausible Values [PVNUM1-PVNUM10] | n/a |

Findings & Discussion

Findings: RQ1, Crosstab

70 percent of people in prison would like to enroll in an education program

Weighted Crosstab Percentages of Dependent Variable [P_Q060] “Yes” Responses, by the Independent Variables within the Analytic Sample, PIAAC Prison Study, 2014

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Gender Female: 72 Male: 70</p> | <p>Personal Education Level Below HS: 70 HS Diploma/Equivalent: 72 Beyond HS: 62</p> | <p>Cognitive Domains (Mean Scores) Literacy: 252.4 (“No”: 243.1) Numeracy: 223.0 (“No”: 212.3)</p> |
| <p>Age Group Below 25 years: 83.6! 25-34: 81.7 35-44: 70.6 45-54: 58 55 and above: 33.1!</p> | <p>Parental Education Level Neither parent completed high school: 63 At least one parent completed high school and some postsecondary education: 72 At least one parent completed a postsecondary degree: 74 Unknown: 67</p> | |
| <p>Race/Ethnicity: Black: 70!; Hispanic: 79!; White: 64; Other: 72! ! = interpret data with caution</p> | | |

Findings: RQ1, Binary Logistic Regression

| Statistically Significant Variables | Model 1 Exp(B) | Model 2 EXP(B) | Model 3 EXP(B) | Model 4 EXP(B) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Age: 35-44 | 1.7943*** | 1.7686*** | 1.7605*** | 1.7612** |
| Age: 45-54 | 2.9804*** | 2.7618*** | 2.7147*** | 2.7087*** |
| Age: Above 55 | 7.9475!*** | 7.5797!*** | 7.4198!*** | 7.4491!*** |
| Race: Hispanic | .5409!** | .4911!*** | .4848!*** | .4817!*** |
| Literacy PVs | -- | 1.0045** | -- | NS |
| Numeracy PVs | -- | -- | 1.0040** | NS |

! = interpret data with caution -- the sample size for this estimate is between 30 and 61 cases.

NS = Not statistically significant

Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Findings, RQ1 Summary

Among the U.S. prison population, higher cognitive-skill levels are associated with a greater interest in educational programs

These skills are dynamic and can change with skill-building programs

Findings: RQ2, Crosstabs

81 percent of respondents who desire education chose a postsecondary level

Weighted Crosstab Percentages of Dependent Variable IP_Q080] “Pre-associate education” or Higher Responses, by the Independent Variables within the Analytic Sample, PIAAC Prison Study, 2014

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Gender Female: 78! Male: 81</p> | <p>Personal Education Level Below HS: 37! HS Diploma/Equivalent: 98! Beyond HS: 99!</p> | <p>Cognitive Domains (Mean Scores) Literacy: 259.6 (< PSE: 221.6) Numeracy: 232.2 (< PSE: 183.9)</p> |
| <p>Age Group (in years) Below 25 : 76! 25-34: 83 35-44: 79 45-54: 84! 55 and above: 88!</p> | <p>Parental Education Level Neither parent completed high school: 81! At least one parent completed high school and some postsecondary education: 81! At least one parent completed a postsecondary degree: 87 Unknown: 75!</p> | |

Race/Ethnicity: Black: 80; Hispanic: 76!; White: 86; Other: 83

! = denotes interpret data with caution

Findings: RQ2, Chi-Square Test of Association

| Statistically Significant Co-variates | Co-variate Values | Interest in Postsecondary Education Percent | No Interest in Postsecondary Education Percent | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | df |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|--|----------|----------|----|
| Personal Education Level | Below high school | 36.0 | 64.0 | 412.387 | .000 | 2 |
| | High school diploma/ equivalent | 97.9 | 2.1 | | | |
| | Beyond high school | 99.1 | 0.9 | | | |
| Parental Education Level | Neither parent completed high school | 79.8 | 20.2 | 10.295 | .016 | 3 |
| | At least one parent completed high school and some postsecondary education | 81.1 | 18.9 | | | |
| | At least one parent completed a postsecondary degree | 87.0 | 13.0 | | | |
| | Unknown | 73.8 | 26.2 | | | |

Findings, RQ2 Summary

Those interested in postsecondary education had higher average cognitive skill scores than those interested in other types of educational programs

Interest in postsecondary education is associated with personal and parental levels of education, but is still an aspiration for some without a HS credential

Implications

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- 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

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- Skill-building could be accomplished through offering challenging adult basic education courses and college preparatory work even where college programs do not yet exist
- Evaluations of all types of education programs should consider a skills dimension

Conclusion

2.2 million people may pursue 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

Thank you!

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