

Incarcerated Adults with Low Skills: Findings from the 2014 PIAAC Prison Study

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Introduction:

Incarcerated adults face multiple educational, economic, and health challenges. Even with basic or high school equivalency (HSE) correctional education programs widely available in prisons, proportionately few incarcerated adults complete them. This paper investigates:

- ❖ the characteristics and assessed skill levels of incarcerated adults with less than high school (LHS) education attainment;
- ❖ how characteristics and assessed skill levels differ by gender and from the general population;
- ❖ the role of current and future learning in the lives of incarcerated adults with low skills

Findings:

Among findings are educational and health vulnerabilities for incarcerated men and women with less than high school education attainment (LHS), such as lower numeracy scores than LHS adults in the general population. The rate of learning disabilities (LD) among LHS incarcerated adults is four times that of the general population. Two-fifths of LHS incarcerated women report fair or poor health, versus one-fourth of LHS incarcerated men doing so. Adults in basic or high school equivalency (HSE) correctional education programs cite jobs after release and gaining knowledge as reasons to attend; the same reasons tend to motivate them for future learning. Even so, the rate of LHS incarcerated adults completing programs and gaining credentials (5%) is even lower than reported in earlier research.

Implications for Practice:

Without at least a high school education, incarcerated and re-entering adults are left educationally vulnerable, and this vulnerability is heightened in impoverished, stressed communities. Both correctional and re-entry education programs need to fully assess entering learners for skills and any unmet learning needs and to review the instructional and support services for adults with learning disabilities, to ensure those services facilitate learning. Prison officials have an opportunity to review adult participation in basic skills programming and to identify ways more incarcerated adults can participate in programming to reduce recidivism after release. As adults re-enter society, re-entry service providers must be prepared to respond to LHS adults' external, family, and community circumstances as adults seek education and employment.