

Educational Characteristics of Prisoners: Data from the ACS

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ABSTRACT

Growth in the prison population has focused attention on the educational characteristics of the adult correctional population since prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment than the general population and are more likely to have GEDs. However, enrollment in prison education programs represents one important way for prisoners to increase their skills and attainment levels while incarcerated. This study brings new and current data to bear on the educational characteristics of prisoners using the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) by examining the attainment and enrollment of adult prisoners and comparing them to the general household population and an economically disadvantaged segment of the household population that may be at risk of incarceration. We find that prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment than the general household population as well as the economically disadvantaged household population. Although fewer persons in adult correctional facilities were enrolled than in the general population, results varied by age. Young prisoners were less likely to be enrolled than young adults in the general population, but older prisoners were more likely to be enrolled than their counterparts in the general population.

This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed on statistical and technical issues are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

INTRODUCTION

Growth in the prison population has focused attention on the educational characteristics of the adult correctional population since prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment than the general population and are more likely to have GEDs. However, enrollment in prison education programs represents one important way for prisoners to increase their skills and attainment levels while incarcerated. Attention to the low educational attainment of prisoners is warranted since educational attainment predicts a variety of individual outcomes, including employment, income, child bearing, health, likelihood of receiving public assistance, and political participation. Inequality in educational outcomes may then affect inequality in other socioeconomic outcomes.

Over the last several decades as scholars have debated the magnitude of racial differences in measures of educational attainment such as high school graduation rates (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010), there has been dramatic growth in the size of the prison population and disproportionately high incarceration rates for low-skilled minority men (PEW 2008, Pettit and Western 2004). A growing body of research questions findings about declining racial inequality drawn from data with household-based sampling frames since they may over- or under-estimate characteristics of the U.S. population or subpopulations when people living in group quarters systematically differ from the rest of the population (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010, Western and Pettit 2005). Scholars argue that failing to consider the educational attainment of prisoners may underestimate racial inequality in educational attainment and other characteristics (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010, Western and Pettit 2005). To address this gap some researchers have had to guess at trends in educational attainment of prisoners from decennial Census data and other researchers have had to piece together a picture of the overall population from numerous datasets gathered from overlapping frames and using varying definitions (Western and

Pettit 2005). In addition to a dearth of information on the educational attainment of prisoners, there is limited enrollment information for the adult correctional population (Coley and Barton 2006, Klein et al. 2004).

This paper analyzes data from the American Community Survey (ACS), which unlike many surveys, collects data from respondents in both households and group quarters, to compare the educational characteristics of the adult correctional population with the population living in households and illustrate the usefulness of this new data source for studying populations residing in institutional facilities. These analyses provide an in depth and more recent examination of the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners, comparing across important subpopulations by age and race, and comparing to the general population. The latest detailed data on inmates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics were gathered in 2004. Accurate and current measures of prisoner characteristics will inform concerned discussions about the rising incarceration rate and its consequences for subgroups with concentrated risks of incarceration.

BACKGROUND

Rising incarceration rates, and the disproportionate incarceration of particular subgroups of the population, have focused scholarly attention on the characteristics of prisoners. Changes in criminal justice policy, including more punitive sentences for drug crime, rapidly increased the size of the prison population through the 1980's, particularly for young low-skill male minorities (Pettit and Western 2004; Western and Pettit 2002). There were approximately 500,000 people in jails or prisons in 1980 compared to 2.3 million in 2008 (BJS, 2008). The state and federal prison population alone doubled between 1990 and 2000, primarily due to changes in sentencing guidelines (Klein et al. 2004). The rise in incarceration rates varied across race and ethnicity. From 1988 to 1994, the number of young black prisoners aged 18 to 25 increased 355 percent, the number of young Hispanics increased 82 percent and the number of

young whites increased 67 percent (Jackson 1997). Over 90 percent of the prison population is men, almost half are black, and the data available to us at this point indicate that 40 percent have not completed high school (Stephan and Karberg 2003, Harlow 2003). This rapid growth in the size of the prison population, and the particularly high incarceration rates for low-skill black men, have focused scholarly attention on several different aspects of the educational characteristics of prisoners. One stream of research has focused descriptively on the low levels of educational attainment of prisoners in an effort to understand the link between educational attainment and incarceration. An additional line of research concerned with the measurement of racial inequality argues for the need to include people in households and correctional facilities in survey sampling frames in order to accurately measure population characteristics and racial inequality. A third group of scholars concerned with recidivism rates focus on the enrollment of prisoners since the development of skills through prison education programs may reduce recidivism rates. We address these three strands of the research literature by analyzing the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners using the ACS and comparing these characteristics with the educational characteristics of the general population.

One area of research focuses on documenting the educational attainment of prisoners and explaining this link between low levels of educational attainment and high risks of incarceration. Studies using existing data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF) show that while 18 percent of the general population does not have a high school diploma or equivalent, over 40 percent of the adult correctional population has not completed high school (Harlow 2003). Furthermore, while almost half of the general population has some postsecondary education, only 13 percent of the adult correctional population has any postsecondary education (Harlow 2003). Prisoners are also more likely than the general population to have a GED (Harlow 2003). Black and Hispanic inmates have lower

levels of educational attainment than white prisoners (Coley and Barton 2006), but education levels of Hispanic prisoners are even lower than for blacks (Jackson 1997). Increased educational attainment may reduce the likelihood of incarceration by raising the returns to work and so raising the opportunity costs of illegal behavior, by changing the psychological effects of criminal activity, and by shaping preferences involved in the decision making process to commit a crime (Lochner and Moretti 2004).

An additional line of research focuses on the consequences of these differences in characteristics between prisoners and the general population on estimating racial inequality since surveys used to estimate population characteristics often do not sample from people living in group quarters, including military barracks and correctional facilities (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010). Given the tremendous growth in the size of the prison population over the last several decades (PEW 2008; West and Sabol 2009), scholars have documented how the exclusion of prisoners from survey data can produce biased social statistics. In particular, scholars have shown that the exclusion of prisoners produces biased measures of labor force participation, wages, and educational attainment for certain subgroups such as young black men and underestimates racial inequality in these outcomes (Welch 1990; Western and Pettit 2000, Western and Pettit 2005, McDonald and Popkin 2001, Heckman and LaFontaine 2010). In order to estimate the characteristics of the U.S. population and racial inequality in sociodemographic outcomes, researchers concerned with the group quarters population have combined multiple data sources in their analyses in order to capture both the population living in households and the population living in group quarters. For example, Western and Pettit (2005) used data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) to capture information on the population living in households and periodic data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics to capture information on prisoners.

Although these innovative methods have raised awareness about the potential bias of statistics based on data that exclude individuals in group quarters, especially correctional facilities, they rely on surveys of prisoners conducted only periodically to measure characteristics of the population in adult correctional facilities. We seek to more accurately estimate the current educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners and the general population using a single and more recent data source—the ACS.

A third line of research regarding the educational characteristics of prisoners examines their enrollment rates in prison education programs. In general, prison education programs are designed to develop skills that prisoners will need to succeed in the workplace (Klein et al. 2004). Prison education and training programs may be expected to lower recidivism rates by raising employment prospects once prisoners are released (Coley and Barton 2006). There are several types of prison education programs, including basic adult education programs geared toward literacy, secondary programs geared toward passing a GED exam, vocational training, special education, college courses, and study release programs where prisoners attend courses at local community colleges (Klein et al. 2004, Coley and Barton 2006). Approximately 90 percent of adult correctional institutions, including federal, state, and private facilities, provide some type of education program (Coley and Barton 2006). States vary in whether these education programs are voluntary or mandatory. Studies based on existing data with broad definitions of enrollment estimate that over half of state prisoners participate in education programs, with 23 percent participating in secondary education programs and 32 percent participating in vocational education programs (Harlow 2003). Since there are not sufficient prison course offerings to meet inmate demand, priority may be given to prisoners with the greatest educational need or upcoming release dates (Klein et al. 2004).

Prison education programs are often designed to reduce future criminal activity and therefore recidivism rates (Bazos and Hausman 2004). Enrollment in prison education programs might reduce recidivism rates by increasing cognitive skills that change behavior and by socializing people to live a crime-free life (Bazos and Hausman 2004). Released prisoners who had enrolled in education programs while in prison were 10-20 percent less likely to commit crimes (Bazos and Hausman 2004). Evidence suggests that participation in prison education programs also increases the wages of prisoners post-release. Among racial minorities, those who participated in GED prison education programs had quarterly earnings 15 percent greater after release than did non-participants (Tyler and Kling 2004).

Coley and Barton (2006) identify a dearth of information regarding prison education programs, enrollment rates, and outcomes, arguing that the most recent data on prison enrollment and education is outdated and needs to be collected more regularly. Current information would be particularly helpful since there is declining monetary investment in prison education programs at the same time that the prison population continues to grow in size (Coley and Barton 2006). Furthermore, Klein et al. (2004) argue that survey sample sizes of available data are too small to enable comparisons in characteristics like enrollment among subpopulations of prisoners.

We seek to address these streams of research, and simultaneously address the issues related to a lack of data on the adult correctional population, using the ACS. The ACS is a continuous survey of individuals living in households and group quarters, including correctional facilities, thereby enabling researchers to study both populations using a single data source. With its large sample size, the ACS data enable us to compare the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners and the general population across important subpopulations, including age, race and ethnic groups. These detailed comparisons will provide useful information for researchers studying the link between education and incarceration and scholars concerned with

the effects of participation in prison education on later outcomes by providing more current and nuanced information on the educational characteristics of prisoners. This detailed comparison of the educational characteristics of incarcerated and household based samples also illustrates the usefulness of this dataset for researchers concerned with the measurement of racial inequality who previously have had to rely on surveys that only sample from households. Although the periodic BJS surveys provide detailed information on the characteristics of prisoners, we utilize the ACS to provide a different and more current view of the educational characteristics of adults housed in correctional facilities.

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the 2009 ACS. The ACS is a continuous survey of individuals living in households and group quarters, including correctional facilities. The ACS is designed to supplement the decennial census by producing annual estimates describing social, demographic, and economic characteristics of people living in the United States.¹ Consequently, the ACS covers the domestic population, including those living in institutions and other group quarters. The ACS is part of the decennial Census program, providing estimates of the characteristics of the population, while the decennial census provides official population totals. The annual ACS sample is approximately 3 million addresses, and data are collected from roughly one-twelfth of the sample each month. The survey is mandatory, and interviews are conducted via mail, telephone, or personal visits.

The ACS began collecting data on individuals living in group quarters in 2006.² The information collected from respondents living in group quarters is similar to the information

¹ The one-year ACS estimates allow researchers to look at the characteristics of communities with populations exceeding 65,000 persons. In December 2010, the Census Bureau released the first set of annual ACS 5-year estimates that enable researchers to examine the characteristics of persons living in more sparsely populated communities.

² People living in group quarters are often excluded from surveys for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that they comprise a difficult-to-capture subset of the population. The ACS has had to work against a variety of

gathered from people residing in households, including questions related to educational attainment and enrollment. In 2009, in an attempt to improve data quality, the ACS introduced a computer assisted personal interview (CAPI) mode of data collection for group quarters interviews. Prior to 2009, all group quarters data were collected via paper assisted personal interview (PAPI). The CAPI instrument helps field workers progress through the interview, prompting them when answers are skipped and alerting them when a respondent provides inconsistent answers. The reduction in imputation rates between 2008 and 2009 is illustrative of the attempts to improve data quality in the group quarters data collection procedures. In 2008, the imputation rate for school enrollment among the adult correctional population was 10.8 percent; the rate in 2009 was 5.9 percent. This is close to the imputation rate for enrollment among persons living in households (2.9 percent). Similarly, the imputation rate for educational attainment dropped from 12.9 percent in 2008 to 9.6 percent in 2009. The adult correctional population in ACS includes adults in federal detention centers, federal prisons, state prisons, local jails (and other municipal confinement facilities), correctional residential facilities, and military disciplinary barracks and jails.³

Variables

The ACS measures educational attainment with a single question.⁴ Respondents are asked to report the highest grade of school completed or the highest degree received. Response categories include: each grade from 1 to 12, regular high school diploma, GED, some college credit (but less than 1 year), one or more years of college credit (but no degree), associate's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, professional degree, or doctorate degree. The ACS

unique challenges associated with collecting data about persons living in correctional facilities. For example, some states have a general rule prohibiting field workers from interviewing inmates. In such cases, the ACS relies on administrative records to gather as much information about the persons in these facilities as possible.

³ Throughout the paper we refer to the adult correctional population as prisoners.

⁴ The CAPI instrument contains follow-up questions on GED attainment for people who report 12th grade but no degree as their highest level of attainment. These questions are recoded into a single attainment item.

measures enrollment with a question that asks whether respondents have attended school or college in the last three months. Respondents are instructed to include only school that leads to a high school diploma or a college degree. Those who answer affirmatively to the enrollment question are then asked whether they attended a public or private school and also the grade or level attended. Possible response categories include: each grade from 1-12, college undergraduate years, and graduate or professional school beyond a bachelor's degree.

Comparison of Alternative Data Sources

Although the ACS provides data on the educational characteristics of prisoners, another source of detailed information on the educational attainment and enrollment of the adult correctional population comes from periodic surveys from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF) is conducted every 5 to 7 years, most recently in 2004. The 2004 state correctional facility (SISCF) sample contains approximately 14,500 state prisoners and the federal correctional facility (SIFCF) sample includes 3,700 federal prisoners, which is smaller than the most recent 2009 ACS sample containing approximately 48,600 adults in correctional facilities (including 27,200 state and 3,900 federal prisoners).⁵

Unlike the ACS, the SISFCF measures educational attainment with several separate questions. The SISFCF first asks for the highest grade attended prior to entry into prison, and then asks whether respondents completed that grade. The survey separately asks whether respondents earned a GED or other high school equivalency certificate, and this may have taken place before or after entry into prison.

The SISFCF and ACS surveys also measure enrollment differently. The SISFCF survey measures enrollment with several questions. Respondents are asked whether they have enrolled

⁵ For a more detailed comparison of the ACS and the BJS surveys, please see Appendix A.

in any type of education program since admission (excluding vocational and job training classes). For those who answered affirmatively, they were then asked to select whether they were enrolled in basic classes up to 9th grade, high school or GED classes, college level courses, English as a second language classes, or some other program. Since the ACS measures enrollment during a point in time (the last 3 months) while the SISFCF measures enrollment at any time since admission, it would be expected that the latter would provide higher estimates of enrollment. Furthermore, the ACS specifically measures enrollment in classes leading to a degree while the SISFCF includes enrollment in much broader courses. Although these are different measures of enrollment, both are useful in studying aspects of the educational experience of prisoners.

These analyses draw on the strengths of the ACS data to provide a current picture of the educational attainment and enrollment of the adult correctional population. Due to the large sample size, the ACS data enable us to compare the educational characteristics of prisoners across important subpopulations, including age, race and ethnic groups. Furthermore, we are able to include populations often excluded from analyses—women and Hispanics. Since the ACS includes people living in households and group quarters, we can directly compare the attainment and enrollment status of prisoners and the general population.

Methods

We first explore the basic demographic characteristics of the adult correctional and household populations to see whether there were differences in age or race and ethnicity that might be expected to affect the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners compared to the general population. We then document the educational attainment and enrollment of the total incarcerated adult population and the incarcerated population by age group (age 18-24, 25-44,

and 45+).⁶ We separate out people aged 18 to 24 since this age group is more likely to be still enrolled in school. We measure educational attainment with four categories, including less than a high school diploma, a high school diploma, a GED, and some college or more. We distinguish between a GED and a high school diploma since prior research suggests that prisoners have disproportionately high rates of GED completion and that the returns to a GED are less than a high school diploma. We measure enrollment with a dichotomous variable for being enrolled in the last 3 months in classes leading to a high school diploma or college degree. Finally, we examine the educational attainment and enrollment for young men age 18 to 24 by race and ethnicity.⁷ We focus on young men for these analyses by race and ethnicity since prior research has highlighted the disproportionate incarceration of young minority men and its consequences.

One benefit of a survey encompassing adults in households and group quarters is the ability to compare the characteristics of prisoners and the general population using identical measures. We first compare the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners to the total general (household) population and by age group and race and ethnicity for young men.⁸ However, since the adult correctional population is disproportionately drawn from an economically disadvantaged segment of society, we document the educational characteristics of adults in the general household population who might be at risk of incarceration in order to compare the characteristics of prisoners to the most similar group in the general population. We develop two separate at risk groups— (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (excluding students), and (2) those whose individual income is below \$14,000 (excluding

⁶ In supplemental analyses we documented the educational attainment of federal, state, and local inmates separately and found that federal inmates have slightly higher levels of educational attainment and local inmates have slightly lower levels of educational attainment. However, in this paper we combine all adults in correctional facilities.

⁷ We use mutually exclusive racial and ethnic categories, displaying results for non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and Hispanic.

⁸ We use the terms “general” and “total household” population interchangeably.

students).⁹ We replicate these analyses for women. We conduct separate analyses for men and women since men comprise a large majority of the prison population and may differ in characteristics from women prisoners.¹⁰ To account for the complex survey design, we use replicate weights to calculate standard errors.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of ACS sample

Before comparing the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners and the general population in the 2009 ACS, Table 1 reports the demographic characteristics of these groups to explore whether there were differences that might be expected to affect the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners compared to the general population. Men were overrepresented among prisoners as they comprised 48 percent of the general adult population but 91 percent of the incarcerated population. In contrast, women were overrepresented among the at-risk subgroups of the general population as they comprised 59 percent of the unemployed and not-in-the-labor-force group and 67 percent of the low income group.

[Table 1 about here]

The racial and ethnic distribution also differed between adults in correctional facilities and the general population. While 68 percent of the general population was non-Hispanic white, 36 percent of the incarcerated population was non-Hispanic white. Blacks were disproportionately represented among prisoners as 39 percent of the prison population was non-Hispanic black compared to 11 percent of the general population. Furthermore, 20 percent of the

⁹ We selected \$14,000 by rounding up to the nearest thousand dollars from the poverty guideline for a single individual in Alaska, the state with the highest poverty guideline. While the 2009 poverty guideline for an individual living in the 48 contiguous states was \$10,830, Hawaii's level was \$12,460 and Alaska's was \$13,530 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml>).

¹⁰ We also examined whether educational attainment and enrollment differed more between inmates who had moved since one year ago and those who had not or between adults in the general population who had moved since one year ago and those who had not. We did not find substantive differences so excluded these mobility analyses from the results section.

adult correctional population and 14 percent of the general population was Hispanic. The adult correctional population was younger than the general population. A greater percentage of adults in the unemployed or not-in-the-labor-force subgroup of the general population was over age 45 compared to prisoners, partially reflecting that this subgroup of the household population includes retired adults. The race, ethnicity, age, and sex breakdowns of the state prison population are similar in the 2009 ACS data and the 2004 SISCF.

Comparison of ACS and BJS data

Before comparing the educational characteristics of the general and adult correctional populations in the 2009 ACS, we compared the 2009 ACS data for state prisoners with the Bureau of Justice Statistics data from the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities (SISCF), keeping in mind differences in how the two surveys measure attainment and enrollment. A greater percentage of males in state facilities reported a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of educational attainment in the SISCF than in the ACS (Table 2). A greater percentage of male prisoners reported some college in the ACS than in the SISCF. These differences in the distribution of educational attainment are consistent with difference between the survey questions. The higher percentage of respondents with a GED as the highest level of educational attainment in the SISCF compared to the ACS likely reflects that the SISCF survey asks a separate question on GED completion. The BJS SISCF question on GEDs specifically includes GEDs earned while incarcerated, while questions on the survey about other levels of education refer to attainment prior to incarceration. College credits earned in prison would presumably be included in the ACS estimates of educational attainment but not in the SISCF estimates.

[Table 2 about here]

The SISCf data show higher enrollment rates than ACS data, also reflecting the differences in measurement between the two datasets (Table 3). Differences in enrollment rates were smallest for state prisoners enrolled in college classes. The SISCf data showed that in 2004, 7 percent of state prisoners had enrolled in college courses since their admission and the ACS data showed that in 2009, 3 percent of state prisoners were enrolled in college classes in the previous three months. Differences in enrollment rates are partially explained by variation in the reference period and question wording since the ACS only asks for enrollment in classes leading towards a degree. Since the SISCf includes a broader type of courses than does the ACS, we would expect to find relatively closer distributions between the two surveys for enrollment in college since college courses are a more narrowly defined group. There is a 22 percentage point difference in overall enrollment between the two surveys but a 4 percentage point difference in enrollment in college courses. Considering both the differing questions and reference periods between the surveys, the differences in estimated enrollment rates are reasonable.

[Table 3 about here]

Educational Attainment

Table 4 shows that male prisoners had lower levels of educational attainment than the general population. While 56 percent of men in the general (household) population had completed some college or higher, only 23 percent of male prisoners had some postsecondary education. Fifteen percent of men in the general population did not complete high school compared with 40 percent of prisoners. Furthermore, GED certificates were more common among the adult correctional population than the general population. Twenty percent of prisoners completed a GED as their highest level of education compared to 4 percent of the general population.

[Table 4 about here]

The differences in educational attainment between the incarcerated and general population were evident at all ages, but the differences were greater for the younger age groups, including men aged 18 to 24 and men aged 25 to 44. For example, there was a 34 percentage point difference between the adult correctional and general population in not completing high school for young men (age 18-24) but an 18 percentage point difference for men age 45 and older.

The bottom panel of Table 4 shows the educational attainment of young men age 18 to 24 by race, ethnicity and incarceration status. Although young black and Hispanic men in the general population have lower levels of educational attainment than young white men, the racial and ethnic differences in high school dropout were even greater among the adult correctional population. While 25 percent of young black men in the general population did not complete high school, 14 percent of young white men did not, resulting in an 11 percentage point difference. In contrast, 58 percent of young black men in prison did not complete high school while 41 percent of young white men in prison did not (an 18 percentage point difference).

By identifying at-risk populations among adults living in households, we aimed to make a comparison between prisoners and a marginalized subset of the general population. The middle columns of Table 4 illustrate that the distribution of educational attainment for the at-risk groups were closer to prisoners' educational attainment than was the case for the general household population. However, adults who were economically disadvantaged continued to have, on average, higher levels of educational attainment than the population living in correctional facilities. The differences were especially pronounced for young men (18-24) where 31 percent of men who were unemployed or not in the labor force and 27 percent of those with low incomes had less than a high school diploma compared to 54 percent of prisoners.

Enrollment

Table 5 turns the analyses to estimates of enrollment for the adult correctional and general male population.¹¹ In 2009, a greater percentage of men in the general population than the adult correctional population reported enrollment. While 9.3 percent of the general population reported attending school that leads to a high school diploma or college degree in the last three months, 7.9 percent of the prisoners did so.

[Table 5 about here]

For both the general and adult correctional populations, more young than older men were enrolled in 2009. However, differences in enrollment rates between prisoners and the general population were greater among young men than among older men. There was a 32 percentage point difference in enrollment between prisoners and the general population for young men age 18-24 and less than a 4 percentage point difference for men age 45 and older. Among men age 45 and older, prisoners were actually more likely to be enrolled than men in the general population. While 4.8 percent of prisoners age 45 and older were enrolled, only 1.4 percent of men in the general population were enrolled. Enrollment rates were the same for the prison population and the population living in households for men age 25-44.

Differences in enrollment between the adult correctional and general populations were greater for young black and white men than for young Hispanic men. This finding partially reflects the particularly low enrollment rates of young Hispanic men in the general population. Consistent with prior research, a greater percentage of young white men in the general population were enrolled than young black and Hispanic men. Among prisoners, however, young black and Hispanic men were more likely to be enrolled than young white men. Approximately 14 percent of young black and Hispanic prisoners reported enrollment while 11 percent of young white prisoners did so.

¹¹ The “at risk” groups were not included in comparisons of enrollment because they were specifically selected to exclude those currently enrolled in college.

Women

Educational Attainment

An examination of educational attainment among women revealed a similar story to that of men's educational attainment. Just as for men, women prisoners had lower levels of educational attainment than the general population (Table 6). While 37 percent of female prisoners had not completed high school in 2009, only 14 percent of the general population did not have high school degrees. While 58 percent of the general population had some postsecondary education, only 31 percent of female prisoners had some college or higher. Furthermore, prisoners were more likely to have a GED as their highest level of education than women in the general population.

[Table 6 about here]

An examination of the at-risk female population showed findings similar to the male analyses. The distributions of educational attainment for the at-risk women were more similar to prisoners' educational attainment than was the distribution for the general household population. However, female prisoners still had lower levels of educational attainment than women who were economically disadvantaged in the general population.

Gender differences in educational attainment among the adult correctional population were consistent with gender differences among the general population. Just as women in the general population are more likely than men to have some postsecondary education and less likely to have not completed high school, so are women in adult correctional facilities more likely than male prisoners to have some postsecondary education.

Enrollment

Table 7 shows enrollment rates for women. Unlike men, there are no overall differences in enrollment between the general and adult correctional populations for women. However,

there are differences by age. Among young women age 18 to 24, a greater proportion of women in the general population were enrolled than in the adult correctional population. Among women age 45 and older, a greater proportion of prisoners than women in the general population were enrolled.

[Table 7 about here]

CONCLUSIONS

Educational attainment has long captured the attention of scholars since it predicts a variety of social and economic individual outcomes. The educational characteristics of the adult correctional population are of particular interest since prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment than the general population. Additionally, prisoners are more likely to have GEDs, which prior research finds do not reap the same rewards as a high school diploma. Enrollment in education classes while in prison represent one important way for prisoners to increase their skills while incarcerated, possibly increasing their post-release economic circumstances and reducing their chances of recidivism. This study brings new and current data to bear on the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners using the ACS.

We confirmed that prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment than the general household population and are more likely to have a GED. These differences were greatest for the younger age groups considered in the analyses, and were greater for young black and Hispanic men than for young white men. While young black and Hispanic men in the general population have lower levels of educational attainment than young white men, the racial and ethnic differences in high school dropout levels were even greater among the adult correctional population.

Overall, a greater percentage of adults in the general population was enrolled in school than was the case for prisoners. However, these results differed by age group. Although fewer

young prisoners were enrolled than young adults in the general population, more prisoners age 45 and older were enrolled than were adults of the same age group in the general population. Therefore, younger adults were more likely to be enrolled if they were in the general population but older adults were more likely to be enrolled if they were in an adult correctional facility.

We also compared the educational attainment of prisoners to several subgroups of the general population that might be at risk of incarceration—those who were unemployed or not in the labor force, and those who were low income. We found that prisoners had even lower attainment than these at-risk groups, suggesting that incarceration may be associated with low education in particular and not just low socioeconomic status. We found similar patterns for women.

In addition to providing a detailed look at the educational attainment and enrollment of prisoners, we showed the usefulness of the ACS data for looking at the prison population and illustrated some of the strengths of the data. Unlike the Bureau of Justice Statistics' SISFCF surveys, the ACS provides annual data on prisoners, has a larger sample size, and can be compared directly to the household population. Scholars interested in exploring the characteristics of adults housed in correctional facilities (or other group quarters facilities), the effects of excluding prisoners from estimates of racial inequality in sociodemographic outcomes, and current enrollment patterns of prisoners should consider utilizing the ACS data.

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Appendix A. Comparison of the American Community Survey and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities

Survey Characteristics	American Community Survey	Bureau of Justice Statistics
Population universe	The resident population, including both the household and group quarters' populations.	Inmates in state and federal correctional facilities.
Periodicity of collection	Every year.	Periodic; 2004 is the most recent survey.
Sample size	Annual sample of about 3 million addresses. Approximately 48,600 adults in correctional facilities, including 27,200 state inmates and 3,900 federal inmates.	Approximately 14,500 state inmates and 3,700 federal inmates.
Questionnaire items	Data on educational attainment are derived from a single question: "What is the highest grade of school...has completed, or the highest degree... has received?"	Data on educational attainment are derived from several questions: "Before your admissions, what was the highest grade of school that you ever attended?" "Did you complete that year?" "Do you have a GED, that is, a high school equivalency certificate?"
	Data on enrollment are derived from two questions: "At any time in the last 3 months, has...attended school or college? Include only nursery or preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, home school, and schooling which leads to a high school diploma or a college degree." "What grade or level was...attending?"	Data on enrollment are derived from two questions: "Since your admission, have you ever been in any other education program? Exclude vocational training." "What kind of program was that-basic classes up to the 9 th grade, high school classes to get a diploma or GED, college level classes, or English as a second language?"
Data collection method	Mail, telephone, and personal-visit interviews.	Personal interviews. Computer-assisted personal interview.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Design and Methodology Report 2009; Bureau of Justice Statistics, SISCF 2004 Codebook.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Adult Population Age 18 and Older by Incarceration Status: 2009

	Household population										Prison population									
	At-risk**					2009 ACS					2004 SISC									
	Total	SE	Unemp/ NILF	SE	Low income	SE	Total	SE	Federal	SE	State	SE	Total	SE	State	SE				
All adults (total number)**	224,460	19	76,402	65	63,415	82	2,143	2	173	8	1,201	10	1,226	1						
Race and ethnicity (percent)																				
White, non-Hispanic	68.3	0.01	69.6	0.04	61.0	0.05	36.1	0.31	23.2	0.83	35.8	0.32	35.2	0.007						
Black, non-Hispanic	11.3	0.01	11.9	0.03	13.6	0.04	39.0	0.27	34.4	0.95	41.4	0.33	40.5	0.007						
Other, non-Hispanic*	6.8	0.01	6.1	0.02	7.3	0.03	5.1	0.16	6.8	0.38	4.7	0.19	6.1	0.004						
Hispanic	13.7	0.01	12.5	0.04	18.1	0.04	19.8	0.27	35.6	1.52	18.1	0.28	18.2	0.005						
Sex (percent)																				
Male	48.3	0.01	40.6	0.04	33.1	0.05	90.9	0.37	92.4	0.84	93.4	0.46	93.2	0.004						
Female	51.7	0.01	59.4	0.04	66.9	0.05	9.1	0.37	7.6	0.84	6.6	0.46	6.8	0.004						
Age (percent)																				
18-24	12.2	0.01	6.4	0.03	13.0	0.05	18.0	0.21	7.9	0.60	14.7	0.27	17.3	0.006						
25-44	36.2	0.01	21.4	0.04	32.3	0.05	58.3	0.31	65.7	0.65	59.1	0.40	63.6	0.007						
45 and older	51.6	0.01	72.1	0.04	54.7	0.05	23.7	0.27	26.4	0.62	26.2	0.41	19.1	0.006						

Universe: Adults age 18 and older in the 2009 ACS

Note: Total numbers (and corresponding standard errors) in thousands. Percentages and total numbers weighted

*Other includes people identifying two or more races

**Two separate at risk populations exclude students: (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (NILF), and (2) those whose individual income is below \$14,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009; Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 2004

Table 2. Comparison by Survey of Educational Attainment of Male State Prisoners
(Percent of male state prisoners age 18 and over)

	BJS SISCF 2004*		ACS 2009	
		SE		SE
All men (total number)	1,124,000	2,000	1,122,011	11,064
Less than high school (percent)	36.3	0.10	39.5	0.48
High school diploma	21.7	0.09	15.8	0.31
GED	30.5	0.09	22.3	0.31
Some college +	11.5	0.05	22.4	0.31
Age				
18-24 (total number)	199,000	6,000	165,524	3,739
Less than high school (percent)	49.0	0.18	52.3	0.95
High school diploma	15.9	0.29	14.2	0.70
GED	31.3	0.22	21.4	0.55
Some college +	3.8	0.07	12.2	0.77
25-44 (total number)	722,000	8,000	657,448	11,183
Less than high school (percent)	34.2	0.12	38.9	0.57
High school diploma	23.0	0.09	15.6	0.41
GED	32.2	0.10	23.8	0.42
Some college +	10.6	0.06	21.7	0.42
45+ (total number)	221,000	7,000	299,039	7,676
Less than high school (percent)	31.2	0.17	33.7	0.74
High school diploma	22.9	0.13	16.9	0.55
GED	24.3	0.13	19.6	0.54
Some college +	21.6	0.14	29.7	0.63
Young men age 18-24				
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)	84,000	5,000	75,135	2,469
Less than high school (percent)	56.4	0.26	58.0	1.52
High school diploma	14.3	0.42	13.8	1.22
GED	26.8	0.45	19.6	1.20
Some college +	2.6	0.08	8.7	0.90
Hispanic (total number)	46,000	3,000	37,675	1,757
Less than high school (percent)	59.3	0.32	61.0	1.88
High school diploma	11.6	0.26	12.5	1.16
GED	25.2	0.30	16.2	1.12
Some college +	4.0	0.18	10.4	1.47
White, non-Hispanic (total number)	56,000	4,000	45,849	1,711
Less than high school (percent)	32.7	0.33	37.4	1.33
High school diploma	19.6	0.34	16.1	1.15
GED	42.2	0.53	28.5	1.44
Some college +	5.5	0.13	18.0	1.42

Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and Hispanic

*Numbers (and corresponding standard errors) rounded to the nearest thousand

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

		BJS SISCF 2004**				ACS 2009			
		All enrollment**	SE	Enrolled in college class	SE	All enrollment	SE	Enrolled in college class	SE
All men (total number)		1,124,000	2,000	1,124,000	2,000	1,122,011	11,064	1,122,011	11,064
Percent enrolled		30.8	0.17	7.0	0.06	9.3	0.23	3.4	0.14
Age									
18-24 (total number)		199,000	6,000	199,000	6,000	165,524	3,739	165,524	3,739
Percent enrolled		37.4	0.37	5.1	0.13	16.3	1.06	4.4	0.60
25-44 (total number)		722,000	8,000	722,000	8,000	657,448	11,183	657,448	11,183
Percent enrolled		30.2	0.18	7.3	0.08	9.1	0.23	3.7	0.16
45+ (total number)		221,000	7,000	221,000	7,000	299,039	7,676	299,039	7,676
Percent enrolled		26.8	0.19	7.9	0.14	5.8	0.40	2.4	0.26
Young men age 18-24									
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)		84,000	5,000	84,000	5,000	75,135	2,469	75,135	2,469
Percent enrolled		40.8	0.34	3.5	0.13	16.8	1.30	3.2	0.65
Hispanic (total number)		46,000	3,000	46,000	3,000	37,675	1,757	37,675	1,757
Percent enrolled		36.2	0.69	3.9	0.18	17.8	1.85	4.8	1.19
White, non-Hispanic (total number)		56,000	4,000	56,000	4,000	45,849	1,711	45,849	1,711
Percent enrolled		33.4	0.35	8.4	0.19	14.1	1.41	5.9	0.98
*Excludes vocational and job training classes.									
**Numbers (and corresponding standard errors) rounded to the nearest thousand									
Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and Hispanic									
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.									

Table 4. Educational Attainment of Men by Incarceration Status, Age, and Race and Ethnicity: 2009

	Household population				Prison population			
	Total*	At risk**						
		Unemployed/ NILF	Low income	SE				
	SE	SE	SE	SE				
All men (total number)	108,500,000	26,887	31,009,923	44,221	20,971,126	50,484	1,947,103	7,980
Less than high school (percent)	15.4	0.05	23.9	0.08	31.5	0.10	40.2	0.34
High school diploma	24.8	0.05	28.2	0.07	30.5	0.10	17.4	0.26
GED	4.3	0.02	6.3	0.05	7.3	0.06	19.8	0.25
Some college +	55.5	0.07	41.5	0.10	30.8	0.11	22.6	0.23
Age								
18-24 (total number)	13,975,956	21,362	2,463,871	19,651	4,069,058	23,364	351,832	4,796
Less than high school (percent)	19.5	0.14	30.9	0.35	27.3	0.26	53.8	0.67
High school diploma	29.2	0.13	39.7	0.36	40.1	0.28	16.7	0.48
GED	4.3	0.07	9.5	0.21	8.4	0.16	17.0	0.40
Some college +	47.0	0.18	19.9	0.33	24.2	0.25	12.5	0.44
25-44 (total number)	40,458,979	28,554	5,959,458	35,658	6,910,320	36,296	1,125,706	9,968
Less than high school (percent)	14.0	0.06	25.9	0.18	30.2	0.20	38.9	0.39
High school diploma	23.4	0.09	30.4	0.22	30.0	0.23	17.1	0.31
GED	4.4	0.03	8.9	0.12	8.6	0.11	21.7	0.33
Some college +	58.2	0.10	34.8	0.21	31.2	0.19	22.4	0.30
45+ (total number)	54,063,572	41,981	22,586,594	58,826	9,991,748	57,042	469,565	8,800
Less than high school (percent)	15.5	0.05	22.7	0.08	34.1	0.13	33.2	0.54
High school diploma	24.7	0.05	26.4	0.08	26.8	0.14	18.7	0.45
GED	4.2	0.03	5.3	0.05	5.8	0.08	17.5	0.43
Some college +	55.7	0.06	45.6	0.10	33.2	0.13	30.7	0.47

Universe: All men age 18+ in 2009 ACS

Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and

*Total includes the at risk population

**Two separate at risk populations exclude students: (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (NILF), and (2) those whose

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

Table 4 Continued. Educational Attainment of Men by Incarceration Status, Age, and Race and Ethnicity: 2009

	Household population				Prison population			
	Total*	At risk**						
		Unemployed/ NILF	Low income	SE				
	SE	SE	SE	SE				
Young men age 18-24								
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)	1,923,406	9,737	556,946	8,103	774,358	8,803	150,135	3,041
Less than high school (percent)	24.8	0.40	34.3	0.79	29.7	0.69	58.4	0.94
High school diploma	31.2	0.40	40.8	0.77	42.1	0.69	16.5	0.76
GED	4.7	0.21	8.6	0.53	7.9	0.46	15.3	0.64
Some college +	39.3	0.49	16.3	0.68	20.3	0.66	9.9	0.71
Hispanic (total number)	2,739,139	7,088	518,476	7,967	952,596	8,859	83,267	2,081
Less than high school (percent)	33.3	0.40	40.9	0.81	41.3	0.66	62.7	1.30
High school diploma	30.9	0.35	38.8	0.73	38.2	0.63	14.1	0.79
GED	3.2	0.10	5.4	0.30	4.6	0.23	12.3	0.78
Some college +	32.6	0.35	14.9	0.52	15.9	0.40	10.8	0.88
White, non-Hispanic (total number)	8,304,339	12,673	1,224,003	12,564	2,095,615	14,715	101,661	2,584
Less than high school (percent)	14.3	0.14	25.5	0.42	20.5	0.31	40.8	1.2
High school diploma	28.7	0.17	40.1	0.47	40.6	0.39	19.4	0.9
GED	4.7	0.09	11.7	0.32	10.4	0.25	23.0	0.9
Some college +	52.3	0.20	22.7	0.43	28.5	0.32	16.8	0.9

Universe: All men age 18+ in 2009 ACS

Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and

*Total includes the at risk population

**Two separate at risk populations exclude students: (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (NILF), and (2) those whose

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

	Household		Prison	
	Population	SE	Population	SE
All men (total number)	108,500,000	26,887	1,947,103	7,980
Percent enrolled	9.3	0.03	7.9	0.15
Age				
18-24 (total number)	13,975,956	21,362	351,832	4,796
Percent enrolled	44.8	0.16	13.1	0.56
25-44 (total number)	40,458,979	28,554	1,125,706	9,968
Percent enrolled	7.7	0.05	7.5	0.16
45+ (total number)	54,063,572	41,981	469,565	8,800
Percent enrolled	1.4	0.02	4.8	0.27
Young men age 18-24				
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)	1,923,406	9,737	150,135	3,041
Percent enrolled	42.2	0.41	13.5	0.74
Hispanic (total number)	2,739,139	7,088	83,267	2,081
Percent enrolled	34.3	0.33	14.2	1.11
White, non-Hispanic (total number)	8,304,339	12,673	101,661	2,584
Percent enrolled	47.4	0.18	11.2	0.91
Universe: All men age 18+ in 2009 ACS				
Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and Hispanic				
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.				

Table 6. Educational Attainment of Women by Incarceration Status, Age, and Race and Ethnicity: 2009

	Household population				Prison population			
	Total*	At-risk**	Unemployed/ NILF	Low income	SE	SE	SE	SE
All women (total number)	115,960,029	24,078	45,391,657	43,335	42,443,356	52,667	195,927	8,014
Less than high school (percent)	13.8	0.04	23.0	0.06	24.9	0.07	36.5	0.88
High school diploma	24.9	0.05	31.1	0.07	31.3	0.07	17.1	0.91
GED	3.3	0.02	4.1	0.03	4.7	0.04	16.0	0.63
Some college +	58.0	0.06	41.8	0.07	39.1	0.08	30.5	1.04
Age								
18-24 (total number)	13,399,522	18,915	2,440,303	14,080	4,178,160	20,030	34,661	1,971
Less than high school (percent)	14.9	0.11	30.0	0.35	23.9	0.25	44.6	2.22
High school diploma	25.1	0.13	38.5	0.37	38.8	0.25	19.3	1.80
GED	2.9	0.05	6.7	0.18	5.9	0.13	13.9	1.48
Some college +	57.1	0.16	24.8	0.29	31.4	0.26	22.1	2.06
25-44 (total number)	40,791,796	25,706	10,421,105	40,584	13,568,097	46,317	123,674	6,532
Less than high school (percent)	10.8	0.06	22.2	0.14	22.1	0.13	35.7	1.07
High school diploma	19.1	0.07	24.6	0.14	25.8	0.13	15.9	1.04
GED	3.3	0.03	5.0	0.07	5.1	0.06	17.0	0.87
Some college +	66.8	0.09	48.3	0.16	47.1	0.15	31.4	1.23
45+ (total number)	61,768,711	39,246	32,530,249	64,626	24,697,099	66,210	37,592	2,711
Less than high school (percent)	15.6	0.05	22.7	0.07	26.6	0.08	31.6	2.25
High school diploma	28.7	0.06	32.7	0.08	33.0	0.09	19.0	2.01
GED	3.3	0.02	3.6	0.03	4.3	0.04	14.4	1.36
Some college +	52.3	0.06	40.9	0.08	36.1	0.09	35.0	2.36

Universe: Women age 18 and older in 2009 ACS

Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone,

*Total includes the at risk population

**Two separate at risk populations exclude students: (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (NILF), and (2) those

*Analyses of racial and ethnic differences are not restricted to young women due to small sample size of incarcerated women

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

Table 6 Continued. Educational Attainment of Women by Incarceration Status, Age, and Race and Ethnicity: 2009

	Household population				Prison population			
	Total*	Unemployed/ NILF	At-risk**	Low income				
	SE	SE	SE	SE	SE			
Race***								
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)	13,970,768	13,568	5,068,571	16,120	5,046,086	21,060	56,316	3,167
Less than high school (percent)	17.0	0.10	30.4	0.20	31.0	0.20	41.6	1.89
High school diploma	26.0	0.13	31.1	0.21	33.5	0.20	21.0	1.89
GED	3.4	0.06	4.4	0.10	4.8	0.11	13.1	1.18
Some college +	53.6	0.14	34.1	0.20	30.7	0.19	24.3	1.66
Hispanic (total number)	15,013,687	8,132	6,014,489	18,811	7,323,391	20,923	29,946	1,813
Less than high school (percent)	35.3	0.15	51.2	0.21	50.7	0.20	51.9	1.96
High school diploma	23.0	0.13	23.7	0.19	24.8	0.18	12.5	1.41
GED	3.4	0.05	3.5	0.09	3.5	0.08	11.9	1.51
Some college +	38.4	0.16	21.6	0.16	21.0	0.16	23.7	1.80
White, non-Hispanic (total number)	78,980,814	22,507	31,402,540	36,712	27,025,468	35,868	96,361	4,650
Less than high school (percent)	9.0	0.03	16.1	0.06	16.6	0.08	28.7	1.19
High school diploma	25.8	0.05	33.4	0.08	33.5	0.09	16.6	1.12
GED	3.4	0.02	4.3	0.04	5.2	0.05	19.5	0.94
Some college +	61.8	0.06	46.2	0.08	44.7	0.09	35.3	1.48

Universe: Women age 18 and older in 2009 ACS

Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone,

*Total includes the at risk population

**Two separate at risk populations exclude students: (1) those who are unemployed or not in the labor force (NILF), and (2) those

*Analyses of racial and ethnic differences are not restricted to young women due to small sample size of incarcerated women

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.

Table 7. Percent of Women Enrolled by Incarceration Status, Age, and Race and Ethnicity: 2009

	Household		Prison	
	Population	SE	Population	SE
All women (total number)	115,960,029	24,078	195,927	8,014
Percent enrolled	10.9	0.03	10.8	0.74
Age				
18-24 (total number)	13,399,522	18,915	34,661	1,971
Percent enrolled	50.7	0.16	14.5	1.52
25-44 (total number)	40,791,796	25,706	123,674	6,532
Percent enrolled	11.0	0.05	10.8	0.80
45+ (total number)	61,768,711	39,246	37,592	2,711
Percent enrolled	2.1	0.02	7.4	1.13
Race*				
Black, non-Hispanic (total number)	13,970,768	13,568	56,316	3,167
Percent enrolled	15.0	0.11	11.1	1.01
Hispanic (total number)	15,013,687	8,132	29,946	1,813
Percent enrolled	11.9	0.08	11.9	1.15
White, non-Hispanic (total number)	78,980,814	22,507	96,361	4,650
Percent enrolled	9.6	0.03	10.4	1.17
Universe: Women age 18 and older in 2009 ACS				
*Analyses of racial and ethnic differences are not restricted to young women due to small sample size of incarcerated women				
Note: racial and ethnic categories are mutually exclusive, including non-Hispanic white alone, non-Hispanic black alone, and Hispanic				
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009.				