Rehabilitation in Prison?

By Michelle S. Phelps | March 21, 2017

Educational Programs for Women Prisoners in 2014

The expansion in imprisonment rates in the U.S. since the 1970s is well known. Less well-reported, however, has been the way this expansion affected women. Although a small share of the prison population (7 percent), women’s imprisonment rates grew faster during the prison boom and have seen a slower decline since 2010. By 2015, over 110,000 women were in prison nationwide—of which, nearly 50% were women of color.[1] Women have unique pathways into and out of prison: women behind bars are more likely to be parents, to have histories of drug use and family trauma, and to be raped while in prison.

Given all of these challenges, it is surprising that there is one area where women prisoners are less disadvantaged than men: educational status.

Paralleling trends in the general population, female prisoners are (slightly) more likely to have completed high school diploma and (much more rarely) college. Still, the vast majority of prisoners have few educational credentials. As of 2004, over 60 percent of state inmates reported that they had not made it past 11th grade.

Below, I analyze data from a new survey of prisoners collected in 2014 by the U.S. Department of Education’s
National Center for Education Statistics’ Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). These data give us an updated, and richer, portrait of prisoners’ educational history and current desires for services. Below, I show that women have gender-specific reasons for being pushed out of school before prison, and, once incarcerated, women are less likely to complete educational credentials behind bars.

Both women (and men) desire far more educational and vocational training than they are currently receiving.

In addition, almost no prisoners are participating in the advanced education programs (i.e. Bachelor’s degree) that have the biggest effects on reducing recidivism. Together, the results suggest that states could be doing much more to equip prisoners to succeed post-release, including expanding evidence-based educational programs and providing funding mechanisms like Pell grants to make college affordable for prisoners.

Let’s start with prisoners’ in-prison participation in formal academic education programs.[2] As shown in Figure 1, the PIAAC data show that the most common response was that prisoners had not been able to take any formal academic program since admission. This was particularly true for women—47 percent of women (compared to 41 percent of men) had not advanced academically during their current period of incarceration.[3] Among those that had completed education, the most common programs were high school or GED programs (with men finishing these programs at a higher rate than women).

The emphasis on remedial education and G.E.D. classes behind bars might explain women’s lower participation rates, as they are more likely to enter prison with such credentials. Alternatively, this might reflect more limited programming options in women’s facilities.

The number of inmates participating in higher education was vanishingly small. Under 10 percent of prisoners in men’s and women’s prisons had completed a certificate from a college or trade school. Even smaller percentages—roughly 3 percent—had completed an Associate’s degree or higher credential. These tiny numbers are dispiriting given research shows that higher education is particularly useful for finding work and staying out of prison post-release. In addition, such programming makes prison environments more humane, benefitting both inmates and prison staff.
As shown in Figure 2, these low participation rates are not due to a lack of desire—63 percent of both men and women behind bars reported that they would like to participate in a formal degree or certificate program. Yet less than half of that—21 percent of men and 28 percent of women—were currently enrolled in such activities at the time of the survey. Oddly, these results suggest the opposite gender trend as compared to the earlier results, with more women currently “studying for any kind of formal degree or certificate” but fewer reporting completion of academic credentials since admission. This might reflect women reporting participation in the kinds of soft-skills programs (which can come with a “certificate”) described below or gender differences in length of program engagement and/or completion rates.
In addition, the PIAAC data allows us to study why prisoners stopped their schooling prior to incarceration—in other words, why are prisoners’ educational trajectories so truncated? As displayed in Figure 3, the most common response for both men and women was that they wanted to work. Men were significantly more likely to report ending school because they were locked up (20 v. 12 percent) or expelled (9 vs. 5 percent), suggesting that men are much more likely to stop education due to criminalization. Women, in contrast, were more likely to be pulled out of education due to family and care-taking responsibilities, including illness or death of loved ones (11 percent) and pregnancy or other health issues (15 percent). These results echo the concerns of other scholars about the gendered barriers disadvantaged young people face in completing their education and the increasing criminalization of young people of color in schools.
Finally, academic programs do not represent the full range of education programs in prison. Most commonly, inmates participate in “soft-skills” training to prepare them for re-entry, including life-skills, job readiness, and vocational training. As shown in Figure 4, just under half of men and women behind bars have participated in reentry and vocational training programs since admission. In addition, classes specifically focused on parenting are especially common among women—25 percent of women (vs. 15 percent of men) reported participating in child-rearing classes since admission. However, these programs have a poor track record of improving outcomes for returning citizens.
Together, these findings suggest that men and women face many similarities in the dearth of supportive in-prison programming, a high level of forced disengagement from schooling early in life, and a desire for meaningful educational programs inside of prison. Not surprisingly, the starkest differences emerge in response to gendered care-taking responsibilities, with women more likely to quit school for family reasons and to be engaged in parenting classes behind bars. These issues will take substantial policy change to address, but we can start by reducing the incarceration rate and spending more on those who remain behind bars. In particular, prisons should offer the kinds of supportive services that improve prison environments and help prepare prisoners to return to their families and communities. The re-opening of Pell grants for prisoners at the end of President Obama’s second term in office was a promising step in the right direction. As groups (including those on the right) continue to campaign for President Trump to continue the momentum on criminal justice reform, education programs should be a core tenant of proposals to both reduce imprisonment rates and make conditions in prisons more humane.

[1] Descriptions of “women’s” or “men’s” experiences are based on the gender designation of inmates’ facility. Transgender prisoners may be placed in gender-affirming or gender-contradictory facilities, depending on states’ policies.

[2] For details on the PIAAC question wording and how I create the outcome categories displayed in the figures, refer to the footnotes at The Society Pages.

[3] This difference is statistically significant at the 10% threshold. The PIAAC has less than 300 respondents from women’s prisons so differences must be substantively large to achieve statistical significance.
Differences reflected in the text are statistically significant at the .10 cut-point unless otherwise noted.

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