



New York State Center for School Safety
175 Route 32 North
New Paltz, NY 12561
Phone: 845-255-8989
Fax: 845-255-3836
E-mail: scss@ulsterboces.org
<http://nyscenterforschoolsafety.org>

FACT SHEET

November 2009

Literacy as a Violence Prevention Strategy

Literacy, School Completion, and Incarceration Rates

Poor literacy affects about 100,000 youth in New York City, and over two million across the country. Children deficient in basic reading skills are less likely to graduate from high school or complete its equivalent, and high school dropouts are incarcerated at much higher rates than their graduate peers. Approximately 1 in 30 men 20-34 years old is incarcerated, and 1 in 9 black males. Studies link literacy with lower rates of incarceration, not only by measuring the literacy of the 2 million American incarcerated, but also by measuring the effects of literacy education programs on recidivism rates. Further, a connection between effectively teaching literacy and violence prevention becomes clear in studying child behavior. Organizations founded to help high school dropouts and those reentering society from incarceration are many and have different priorities: the majority of funding goes to help the job-ready, but an increasing emphasis is being placed on literacy training, GED classes, and higher education as a way to get Americans ready for careers.

Literacy, Dropout Rates, and Incarceration Rates

The connections between poor literacy, violence, and incarceration have been documented, and the problems begin in the primary grades. Evidence from studies, surveys, and the personal accounts of teachers and school administrators clearly shows that students deficient in basic reading skills are less likely to graduate from high school or complete its equivalent, that racial and ethnic disparities exist in those dropout rates, and that high school dropouts are incarcerated at much higher rates than graduates. Finally, the costs of the correlated problems are mounting, as spending on corrections skyrockets and recidivism rates fail to decrease.

Academic Underachievement: Black and Hispanic Youth

Males of color, especially in urban and/or impoverished communities, must overcome social pressure and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes against demonstrating intelligence and academic achievement. Such attitudes are

promoted by peers, by the presence of gangs in the neighborhoods, and by negativity toward education in hip-hop and visual media. High school dropout/completion rates are telling: only 64.1 percent of Hispanic and 83.7 percent of Black 18-24 year olds have completed secondary high school or its equivalent, compared to 91.8 percent of Whites and 94.6 percent of Asians in the same age group.

Literacy and the Disruptive Student

Effectively teaching literacy skills from elementary school through high school is vital in promoting higher graduation rates, as poor reading and its direct effects on other areas of study place students at the highest risk of dropping out. Although the typical curriculum currently teaches children how to read early in elementary school and then expects them to read to learn by third grade, this strategy leaves behind thousands of children who will then struggle their entire lives. As students reach adolescence and their social priority is the approval of their peers, many will shy away from asking questions and resist working hard to overcome their reading problems, often acting out or distancing themselves from school instead. Without intervention, 74 percent of these children will never catch up. Failure to learn basic reading skills in the first three years of schooling leads to low self-confidence and often to disruptive behaviors, which in turn lead to greater problems that adversely affect both the individual and the community.

Literacy and Dropouts

Struggling readers move into high school already years behind their independently reading classmates in basic core skills like reading, writing, and mathematics, and are much more likely than the average student to drop out of school before graduating from high school. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that more than 67 percent of eighth-graders and 25 percent of all high school students read below grade level. In total, the middle and high schools of America hold six million struggling readers, who are at the highest risk of becoming part of the more than 30 percent of secondary school students who will not graduate from high school on time, if at all. Almost 70 percent of young school dropouts are poorly literate or are missing other skills, and primarily leave school for this reason.

Dropouts and Incarceration

In 2008, 54 percent of high school dropouts 16-24 years old were unemployed, compared to 32 percent of high school graduates and 13 percent of those with a college degree. One in 10 young male high school dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention, compared with 1 in 35 graduates. Racial and ethnic disparities exist within the dropout population, with almost 1 in 4 young black male dropouts incarcerated on any given day, as opposed to 1 in 14 white, Asian, or Hispanic dropouts. In 2003, 75 percent of state prison inmates, 60 percent of federal prison inmates, and 70 percent of jail inmates were all high school dropouts. Finally, 70 percent of all incarcerated adults cannot read at a 4th-grade level. The cycle of poor literacy, violence, dropping out, incarceration, and recidivism must be broken at the earliest stages of the educational process.

Approaches, Programs, Results

With the road into so many societal ills leading back into high school completion and literacy, a number of organizations have formed to combat illiteracy with aims of improving the quality of life for the clients and lowering violent crime and incarceration rates for society. Programs focusing on children and adults have mostly seen expected success, with sometimes measurable, sometimes qualitative results.

Prison Educational Programs and Recidivism

Prison education programs reduce recidivism by 29 percent nationwide. Literacy training in Arizona's probation department cut recidivism by 25 percent, and in GED recipients almost 50 percent. In Texas, the recidivism rate for convicts leaving prison

without degrees was 60 percent, while the rate for those leaving with associate's degrees was 13.7 percent, bachelor's degrees 5.6 percent, and master's degrees 0 percent. Despite their successes, however, education programs offered free to prisoners are, for the most part, politically unpopular, and therefore under-funded.

Teaching Literacy Skills as Violence Prevention

Not only does functional literacy increase the chances of gainful employment and therefore reduce the nonproductive free time and the despair that spark some violent crimes, but it also produces people who will be confident in their intellect, better problem-solvers, and less likely to lash out violently. Research on literacy and violence among teenagers during a summer camp showed struggling readers to be at a much higher risk of engaging in acts of aggression than their peers reading at grade-level. Several anti-violence and re-entry programs, such as Students Against Violence Everywhere, The Melissa Institute, Fortune Society, and Getting Out Staying Out, have focused on improving child and adult literacy for the purpose of reducing violence, crime, and recidivism.

The job market is disastrous for the uneducated and unskilled, and even worse for those convicted of crimes, but most public and private funding for dropouts targets those already prepared for quick job placement. Experts and advocates argue that to help the large dropout and convict populations, programs must focus on literacy, other core skills, GED completion, and higher education. To go to the source of these problems, however, means that we must implement strategies that improve the teaching of literacy skills at the earliest stages.
