

# Literacy Behind Bars: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey

## Chapter 4: Education and Job Training in Prison

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Prisons are intended to rehabilitate criminal offenders, as well as to punish and incapacitate them. The education and training systems operating within most prisons are a key component of the rehabilitation mission of prisons. Previous studies have shown a relationship between participation in educational programs and recidivism rates, with inmates who attend education programs less likely to be reincarcerated after their release (Vacca 2004).

There are many reasons why prison inmates may be motivated to participate in education and training programs. Among these may be a realization that they do not have skills that will lead to employment upon their release from prison. As one inmate said, "I've never had a ca-

reer. I've had jobs, but never had anything that would take me anywhere. It's scary to come out of jail and not realize what you're going to do" (Clayton 2005).

This chapter describes the relationships among literacy, education, and vocational training in prison. The analyses in the chapter discuss both the prevalence of inmate participation in education and training programs and the relationship between literacy levels and program participation.

### Academic Education

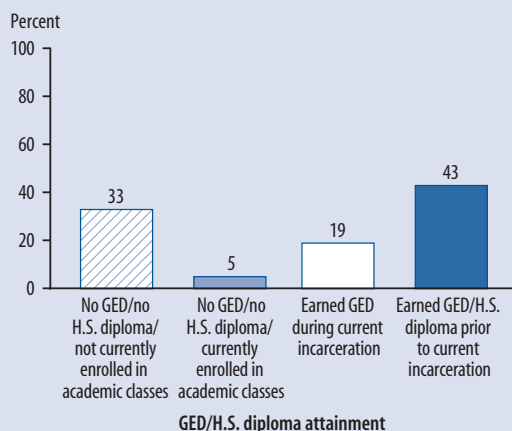
In both 1992 and 2003, GED classes were available in most prisons. However, because of restrictions in Pell Grants that were implemented in 1994, higher educational opportunities were more limited for prison in-

mates in 2003 than in 1992 (Welsh 2002).

In 2003, some 43 percent of prison inmates had a high school diploma or a GED/high school equivalency certificate when they began their current incarceration, so helping inmates complete their high school education is a major aim of many prison academic programs (figure 4-1).<sup>11</sup> Among prison inmates in 2003, some 19 percent had earned their GED/high school equivalency certificate during their current incarceration, and an additional 5 percent were currently enrolled in academic classes.

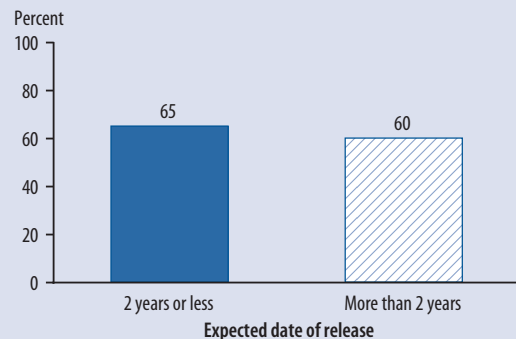
Having a GED/high school equivalency certificate or a high school diploma may be particularly important for inmates who expect to be released soon and

**Figure 4-1. Percentage of the adult prison population, by GED/high school diploma attainment: 2003**



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. The category "earned GED/H.S. diploma prior to current incarceration" includes prison inmates who had higher levels of educational attainment (postsecondary education) prior to their current incarceration. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-2. Percentage of the adult prison population with a GED/high school equivalency certificate or high school diploma, by expected date of release: 2003**



NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. The category "earned GED/H.S. diploma prior to current incarceration" includes prison inmates who had higher levels of educational attainment (postsecondary education) prior to their current incarceration. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

will need to find a job outside of prison. However, the difference in the percentage of inmates who expected to be released in 2 years or less and had a GED/high school equivalency certificate or high school diploma, and the percentage of inmates who expected to be released in more than 2 years and had a GED/high school equivalency certificate or high school diploma, was not statistically significant. (figure 4-2)

As discussed in chapter 2, prison inmates' average prose and quantitative literacy increased with each increasing education level, and their document literacy increased with each increasing education level up to a high school diploma or GED/high school equivalency certificate (figure 2-7).

Prison inmates who had a high school diploma or a GED/high school equivalency certificate (either earned during their

current incarceration or prior to their current incarceration) had higher average prose, document, and quantitative literacy than inmates who were currently enrolled in academic classes in prison but had not yet earned their GED/high school equivalency certificate (figure 4-3). They also had higher average prose, document, and quantitative literacy than inmates who were not enrolled in any academic classes. The differences in average prose, document, and quantitative literacy between inmates who earned their GED/high school equivalency certificate during their current incarceration and inmates who entered prison with a high school diploma or GED/high school equivalency certificate were not statistically significant.

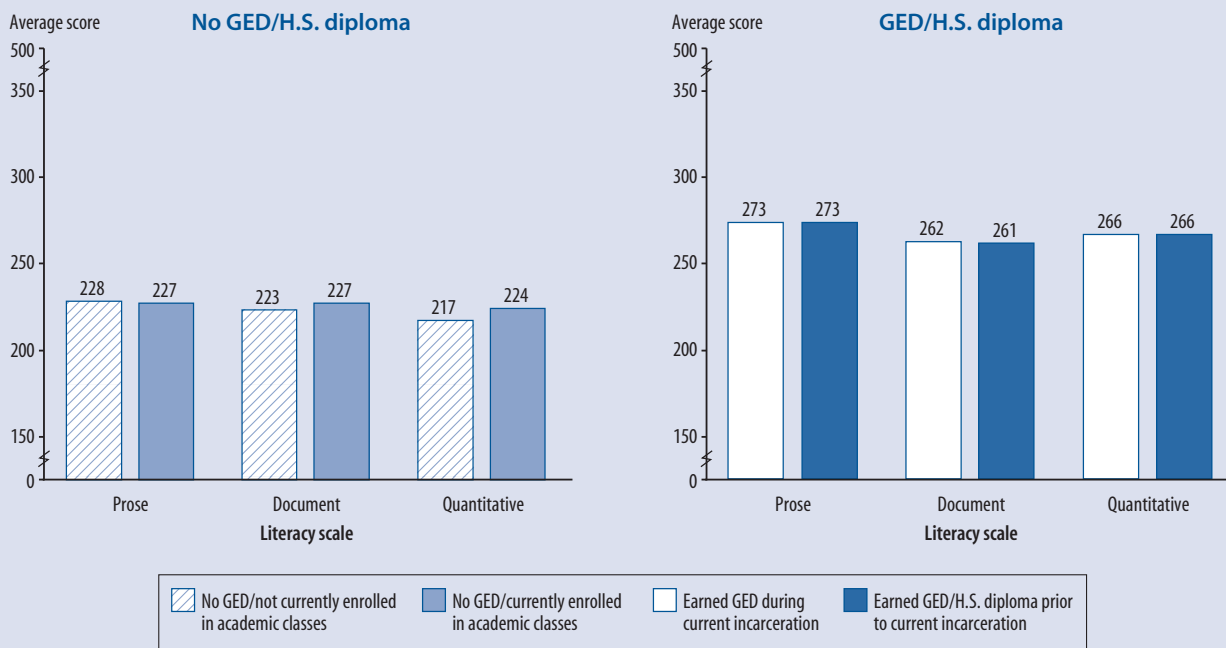
A lower percentage of prison inmates who had a high school diploma or a GED/high school

equivalency certificate had *Below Basic* prose and quantitative literacy than prison inmates who were currently enrolled in academic classes or did not have a GED/high school equivalency certificate and were not enrolled in classes (figure 4-4). Similar to figure 4-3, there were no statistically significant differences in the percentage of inmates at any of the literacy levels between inmates who earned their high school diploma or GED/high school equivalency certificate prior to their current incarceration and inmates who earned their GED/high school equivalency certificate during their current incarceration.

### Vocational Education

Vocational education programs are designed to prepare prison inmates for work after their release from prison. In 2000, some 56% of state prisons and 94%

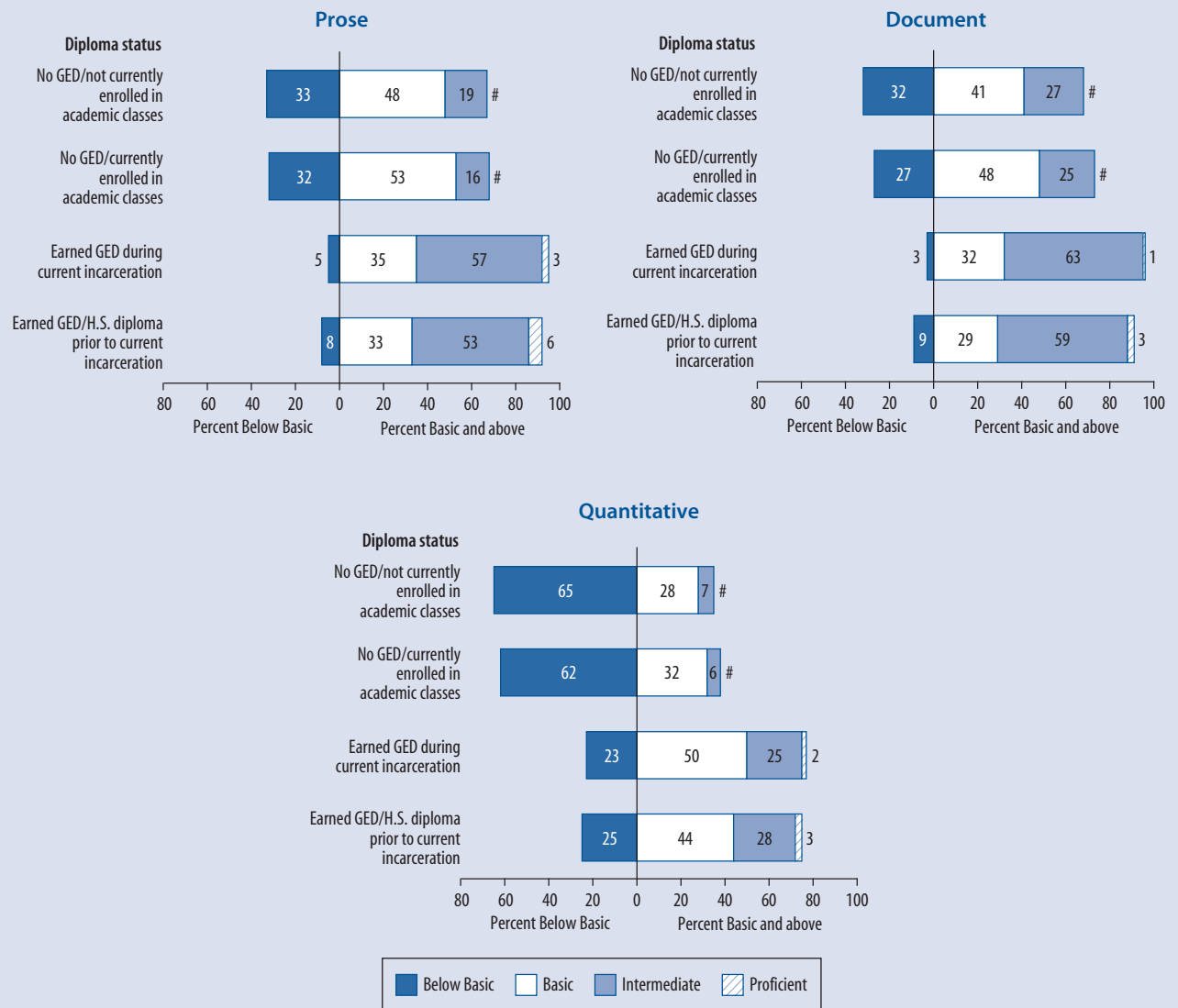
**Figure 4-3. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of the adult prison population, by GED/high school diploma attainment: 2003**



NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. The category "earned GED/H.S. diploma prior to current incarceration" includes prison inmates who had higher levels of educational attainment (postsecondary education) prior to their current incarceration.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-4. Percentage of the adult prison population in each prose, document, and quantitative literacy level, by GED/high school diploma attainment: 2003**



# Rounds to zero.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure. The category "earned GED/H.S. diploma prior to current incarceration" includes prison inmates who had higher levels of educational attainment (postsecondary education) prior to their current incarceration.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

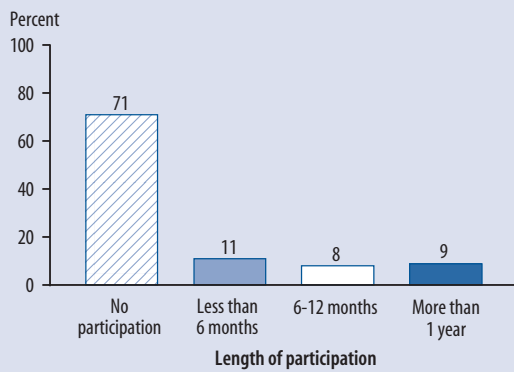
of federal prisons offered vocational training (Harlow 2003). Examples of the types of vocational education programs sometimes offered by prisons are auto mechanics, construction trades, equipment repair, HVAC installation and repair, culinary arts, cosmetology, and desktop publishing. The exact programs offered differ among prisons. As shown in figure 4-5, during their

current incarceration, 71 percent of prison inmates had not participated in any vocational training, 11 percent participated in vocational training programs that lasted less than 6 months, 8 percent participated in programs that lasted 6 to 12 months, and 9 percent participated in vocational training programs that lasted more than a

year. In 2003, 14 percent of inmates were on a waiting list to participate in a vocational education program, and 10 percent were enrolled in vocational education classes (figure 4-6).

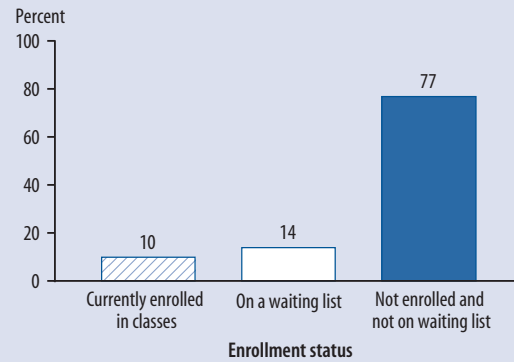
Participation in vocational training may be particularly important for inmates who are getting close to their release date and will need to find a job out-

**Figure 4-5. Percentage of the adult prison population, by length of participation in vocational training programs: 2003**



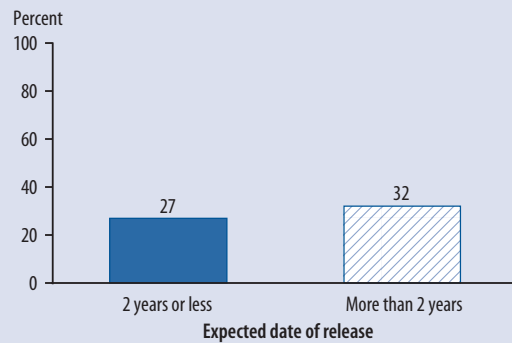
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-6. Percentage of the adult prison population, by enrollment in vocational training: 2003**



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-7. Percentage of the adult prison population who participated in vocational training during their current incarceration, by expected date of release: 2003**



NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

side of prison. However, the percentage of incarcerated adults who expected to be released within the next 2 years and participated in vocational training was not statistically significantly different from the percentage Vocational training programs often include academic instruction in the reading, writing, and mathematics skills required for a particular profession, as well as instruction in general work skills such as how to communicate or work with other people. Among those inmates who participated in vocational training programs, 46 percent received some instruction in reading as part of the program, 44 percent received instruction in writing, 63 percent received instruction in mathematics, 31 percent received instruction in computer skills, and 74 percent received instruction in how to communicate or work better with other people (figure 4-8).

Prison inmates who had participated in vocational training in the past had higher average prose and document literacy than inmates who had not par-

ticipated in any vocational training (figure 4-9). A higher percentage of prison inmates with *Below Basic* prose literacy than with *Intermediate* prose literacy had not participated in any vocational training programs (figure 4-10).

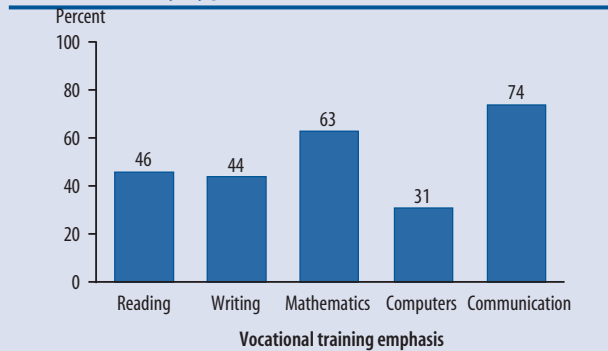
### Skill Certification

Information technology (IT) is a growing area of employment. Certification programs, both within prisons and for the general population, are becoming more commonly available. IT certification is available in a variety of areas, including both basic skills such as word processing and more advanced skills such as computer networking. Other types of job-related skill certification that are recognized by a licensing board or an industry or professional association also provide credentials that are recognized in the job market. Certification programs are sometimes offered by

prisons as part of their vocational education program. As shown in figure 4-11, some 6 percent of adults in prisons had some type of IT certification in 2003 (earned either in incarceration prior to their current incarceration), compared with 8 percent of adults living in households. The difference in the percentage of adults in prisons and households who had other types of certification was not statistically significant.

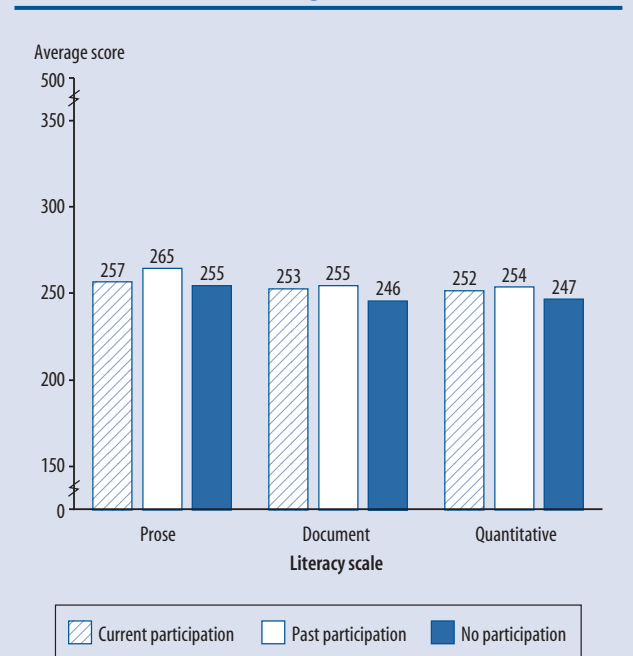
Within both the prison and households populations, adults who had received IT or other certification had higher prose, document, and quantitative literacy than adults who had not received any certification (figures 4-12 and 4-13). However, adults in the prison population who had received IT or other certification had lower average lit-

**Figure 4-8. Percentage of the adult prison population participating in vocational training who received selected types of instruction as part of the vocational training, by type of instruction: 2003**



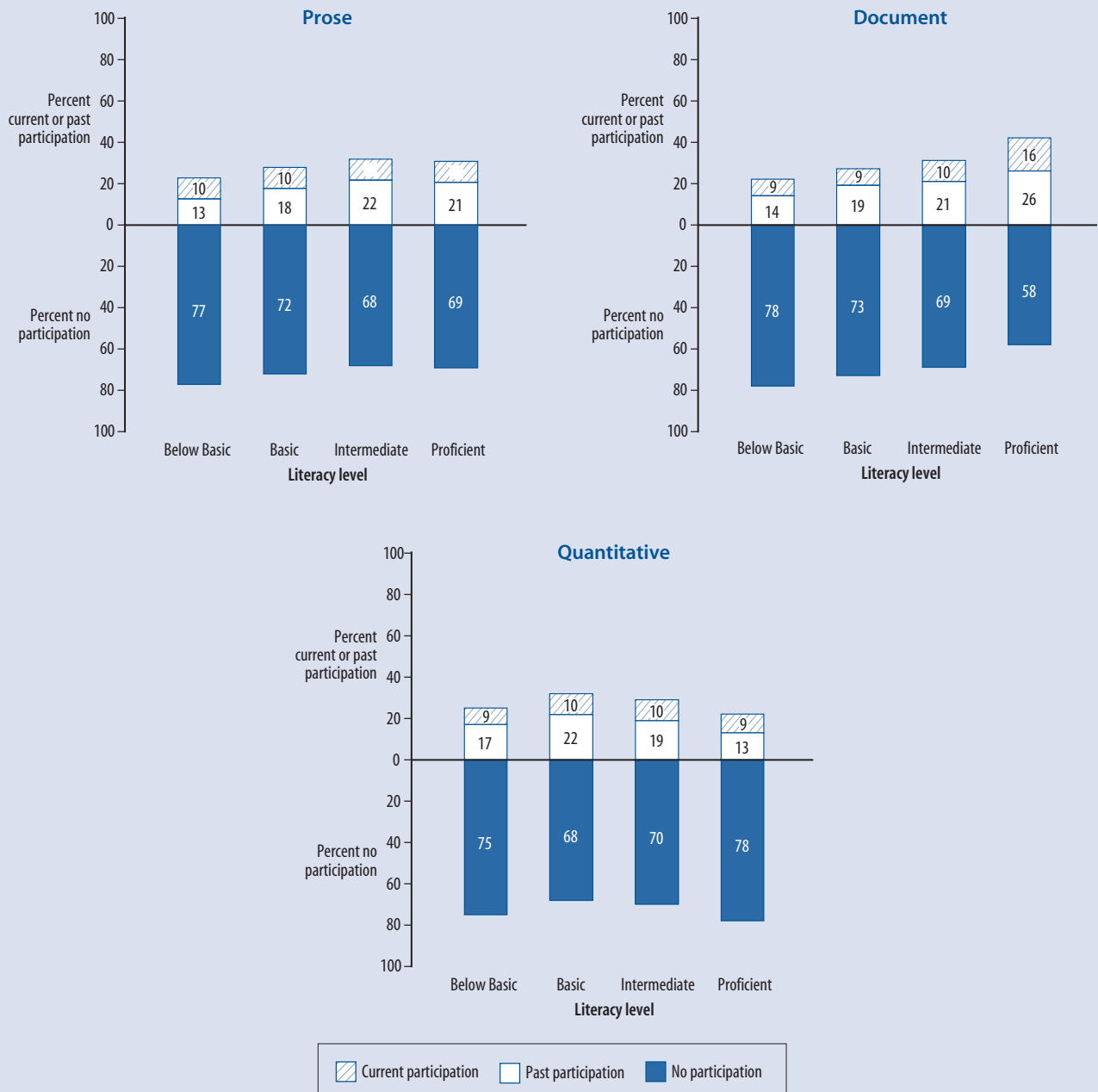
NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-9. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of the adult prison population, by participation in vocational training: 2003**



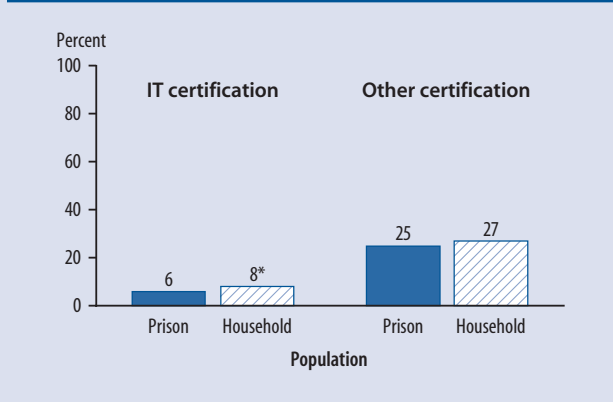
NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-10. Percentage of the adult prison population who participated in vocational training, by prose, document, and quantitative literacy level: 2003**



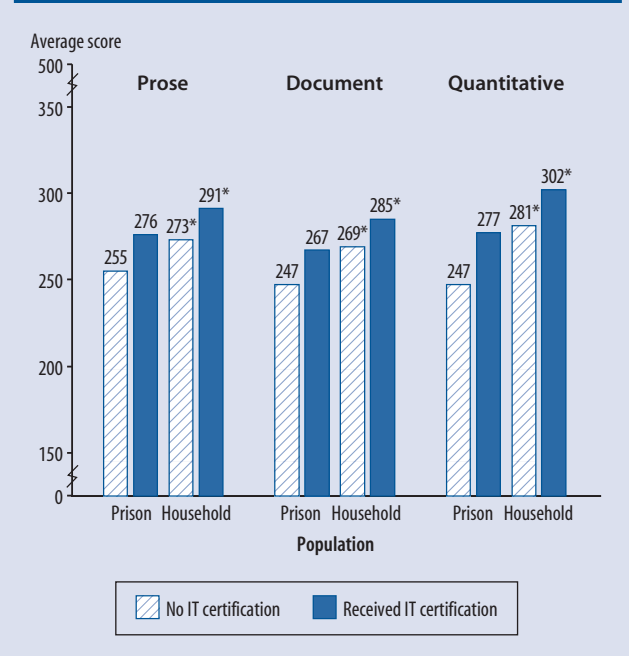
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
 SOURCE: U. S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-11. Percentage of the adult prison and household populations who have received skill certification: 2003**



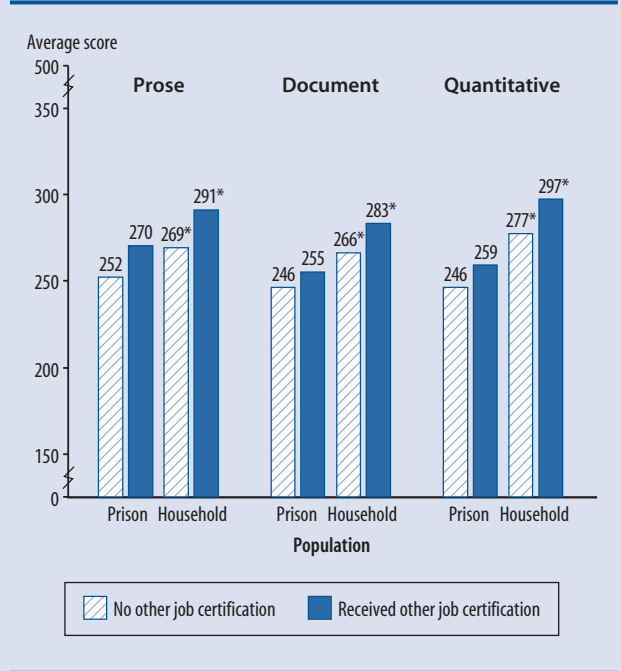
\*Significantly different from prison population.  
 NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons or households. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent of the prison sample and 3 percent of the household sample in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-12. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of the adult prison and household populations, by receipt of information technology skill certification: 2003**



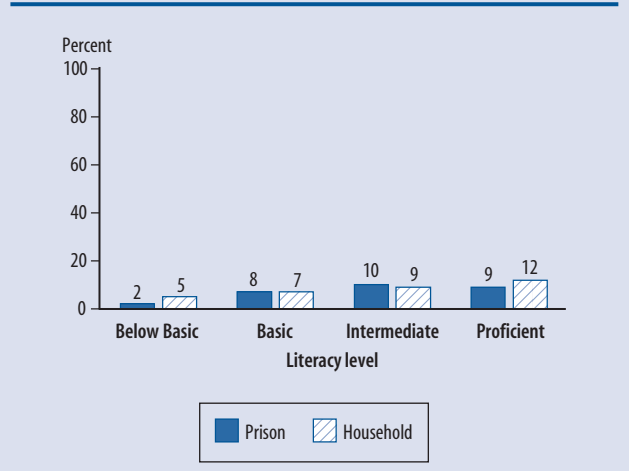
\*Significantly different from prison population.  
 NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons or households. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent of the prison sample and 3 percent of the household sample in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-13. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of the adult prison and household populations, by receipt of other job-related skill certification: 2003**



\*Significantly different from prison population.  
 NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons or households. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent of the prison sample and 3 percent of the household sample in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

**Figure 4-14. Percentage of the adult prison and household populations in each quantitative literacy level, by receipt of information technology skill certification: 2003**



NOTE: Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in prisons or households. Adults who could not be interviewed due to language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (1 percent of the prison sample and 3 percent of the household sample in 2003) are excluded from this figure.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

eracy on all three scales than adults in the household population who had received the same type of certification.

In both the prison and household populations, the differences in the percentage of adults in each quantitative literacy level who had received IT certification were not significant (figure 4-14). Within each quantitative literacy level, the differences in the percentage of the prison and household populations with IT certification were not statistically significant.

Within both the prison and household populations, adults with *Below Basic* quantitative literacy were less likely to have received certification other than IT than adults with *Basic* or *Intermediate* quantitative literacy (figure 4-15).

## References

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- Vacca, J.S. (2004). Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 55(4): 297-305.
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Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. This document is in the public domain.

## Endnotes

- 11 The 43 percent of prison inmates who had a high school diploma or a GED/high school equivalency certificate when they began their current incarceration includes prison inmates who had higher levels of educational attainment (postsecondary education) prior to their current incarceration.