

# Correctional Education: Getting the Data We Need

Steven Klein  
Michelle Tolbert

## Abstract

*A significant issue in correctional education is the lack of policy-relevant data comparable across states. This article describes an effort to address this issue: the Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website and the two research projects that led to their development. Analyzing results from two national surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, we found significant limitations in the data, particularly with respect to their relevance to policy making. We then conducted a feasibility study with correctional education administrators in eight states to see if common definitions and programming instructions could be formulated for use with existing state data, so that data could be aggregated across states to achieve a fuller picture of correctional education nationally. Based on this research, we collaborated with 12 states and several federal agencies to create the Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website ([www.cedatanetwork.org](http://www.cedatanetwork.org)) to enable state correctional education administrators to gather and analyze comparable data across states.*

## Introduction

Incarcerated adults have among the lowest academic attainment and literacy rates and the highest disability rates in U.S. society. Most inmates re-enter society with no more skills than they had when they entered prison. Frustrated by a lack of marketable skills, burdened with a criminal record, and released into the community without transitional services or support, many return to illegal activities.

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of the following MPR Associates staff to this article: Donna Fowler, Emily Forrest Cataldi, Gina Tauschek, and Rosio Pedroso.

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of John Linton of the U.S. Department of Education and the contributions of our MPR Associates colleagues Donna Fowler, Emily Forrest Cataldi, Gina Tauschek, and Rosio Pedroso.

Correctional education programs are intended to break this cycle of catch-and-release by giving inmates the skills they need to succeed in the workplace and the community. Federal and state investments in correctional education, however, have fallen over the past decade, even as jail and prison populations have risen. Increasing inmate access to correctional education programs will require providing state policymakers and the general public with a better understanding of the contribution correctional education makes to inmates' lives and to society. This, in turn, requires good data on correctional education. However, as Richard J. Coley and Paul E. Barton (2006) observe: "Seldom is there a comprehensive survey that provides [correctional education] data state-by-state, and the data that are available do not get down to the level of detail that allow informed judgments about quality and effectiveness."

The Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, represent a major step in overcoming the data deficit in correctional education. Designed to encourage voluntary cooperation among states in collecting and analyzing correctional education data, the Guidebook and website grew out of two recent research projects. The first looked at existing federal data sources to determine what kind of information is available nationally on correctional education and to examine the scale and effectiveness of correctional education programs offered in federal and state prisons. From this analysis, the broad outlines of correctional education in the U.S. emerged, but perhaps the most valuable finding was what we couldn't find – the information necessary to draw some firm conclusions about the effectiveness of correctional education.

The second project investigated the feasibility of generating state data sufficiently comparable so that they could be aggregated to construct a reasonable picture of correctional education nationwide. Federal data are useful, but they have some significant limitations, especially the lack of detail necessary to inform policy. State correctional agencies, however, routinely gather substantial data with the potential to tell a compelling story about the benefits of prison instruction, as well as to identify exemplary programs and practices. This project showed that, indeed, state data collection based on common variables and procedures was both possible and useful. These findings led directly to the creation of the Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website.

### **What the Data Does – and Does Not – Tell Us**

We examined available federal data from two national surveys administered by the U.S. Department of Justice--the Census of State and Federal Adult

Correctional Facilities and the Survey of Inmates of State and Federal Correctional Facilities – and developed indicators on the scale and effectiveness of correctional education programs offered in federal and state prisons (Klein et al., 2004). The indicators include:

**Availability of correctional education.** Nearly all federal, state, and private prisons offer educational services to inmates, with federal prisons generally offering a broader spectrum of instructional services than their state or private counterparts (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995, 2000). Available data do not reveal the scope of educational offerings, enrollment levels, or the intensity of coursework. It is difficult to interpret these data, however, because prison staff use a variety of classifications for coursework. For example, some administrators may label production-oriented prison industries as “vocational training.” Others may classify advanced vocational training as college coursework, if it is offered at the postsecondary level. For this reason, these estimates of available educational services may be overstated.

**Correctional education staff.** Between 1990 and 2000, the total number of correctional education staff grew nearly 26 percent. But the proportion of educational staff declined during the period – falling from 4.1 to 3.2 percent of total institutional staff. This means that the ratio of inmates to instructors rose dramatically – from 65.5 to 95.4 inmates per instructor (U.S. Department of Justice, 1990, 1995, 2000). Because information differentiating full-time from part-time staff or volunteers is not available, these figures may underestimate the actual inmate-to-instructor ratio if institutions rely on part-timers.

**Participants in correctional education.** Roughly half of all inmates in federal and state prisons participate in correctional education, with priority often given to those with upcoming release dates or the greatest need for education. Most enroll in vocational training or GED preparation. Of the roughly 52 percent of state inmates involved in correctional education in 1997, about 32 percent were enrolled in vocational training and nearly 24 percent in high school or GED coursework (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). In some states, policies require inmates without a high school diploma to participate in correctional education.

Inmates with the greatest educational needs and female, minority, and younger inmates were most likely to participate in correctional education. Those lacking a high school diploma were more likely than their more

educated peers to participate. Data from 1997 show large percentages enrolled in adult basic education, GED preparation, and English language instruction (nearly 58 percent of federal and 46 percent of state inmates with less than an 8th-grade education, and 60 percent of federal and 44 percent of state inmates with some high school education). Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than whites to participate in correctional education in state prisons in 1997, especially in high school or GED instruction. Whites were somewhat more likely to enroll in college courses than either of these groups (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

Participation also varied by the type of inmate offense. Nearly two-thirds of state inmates imprisoned for violent offenses participated in correctional education programs. Violent offenders generally get longer sentences, so they have more time to participate in educational programs. In general, inmates serving sentences of six or more years are more likely to have been involved in correctional education than those with shorter sentences (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

**Outcomes for correctional education participants.** Nearly three-fourths of federal and state inmates who held a GED certificate earned it while imprisoned (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). Tracking inmate educational outcomes is complicated because relatively few programs terminate with a recognized award such as the GED certificate. The different definitions used to characterize educational offerings complicate this picture. With the exception of data on inmate GED completion, there are no reliable figures on the educational attainment of inmates participating in correctional education.

There is increasing evidence that correctional education participants have lower recidivism rates and earn higher wages than non-participants. The most recent meta-analyses of studies examining the effects of education on recidivism found generally positive effects for a variety of correctional education efforts (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2004). The Three-State Recidivism Study commissioned by the Office of Correctional Education of the U.S. Department of Education tracked 3,200 inmates released in 1997-1998 from prisons in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio for three years. Researchers found that, compared with non-participants, correctional education participants were less likely to be rearrested, convicted, and incarcerated, and they earned higher wages for each year of the study (Steurer & Smith, 2003). These results cannot be generalized nationally because of variations in correctional education programs, facilities, and data collection across states.

### Limits on Correctional Education Data

We found serious limitations in the data available for all indicators. These include:

**Lack of standardization.** Correctional education data lack consensus or standard definitions in several important areas. These include definitions of staff positions, program offerings and coursework, educational attainment, program completion, and categories for allocating funds. In addition, there are no standard reporting procedures.

**Lack of detailed information.** More comprehensive information is needed on correctional education programs and their enrollment, duration, and curricula, as well as the demographics of participants. Information on correctional education staff needs to incorporate their assignments, the number of full-time-equivalent instructors, instructor credentials, donated instructional services, and time allocated to classroom instruction.

**Limits on documenting outcomes.** Currently it is difficult to document outcomes of correctional education for programs in which no recognized certification or credential (such as the GED) exists.

**Limits on tracking state expenditures.** Developing an accurate assessment of state expenditures on correctional education is difficult because of the lack of standardization described above. Further, correctional education funds come from various sources with different reporting requirements, and funds allocated within other state departments (i.e., education) may not necessarily show up as expenditures for correctional education.

Available data on correctional education, then, cannot provide us with a good picture of that field nationwide. Nor can they be used to evaluate outcomes, thereby providing vital information about the impact of correctional education and justification for strengthening it. As Coley and Barton (2006) urge: "Federal and state justice, corrections, and education departments must collaborate to get the data needed to judge the reach and effectiveness of prison education and training programs."

### Getting the Data We Need

The data problems and limitations described above are complicated and costly to overcome, so we decided first to try to make the most of available data. To do so, we asked: Can we construct common measures of performance to

generate comparable information across states? And, if so, can we persuade states to participate voluntarily in a collaborative data-gathering enterprise?

We conducted a feasibility study with correctional administrators in Arizona, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas, as well as representatives of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the National Institute for Correctional Education, to formulate common definitions and programming instructions for state correctional data and use them to develop comparable data across states.

We created a set of common definitions and analytic tools and provided programming procedures to state administrators, who used them to analyze existing data for five of the indicators examined in our previous studies. States re-coded their data to accomplish this. These indicators were:

- The number of public and private prison facilities and inmates incarcerated.
- The highest level of education completed by inmates as of their most recent prison admission.
- The type of correctional education programs offered within facilities.
- Inmate participation in prison correctional education based on their educational background.
- The number of inmates completing a prison-based education program offering a recognized credential.

### **Can Comparable Data Be Generated Across States?**

The short answer is "Yes." Our feasibility study showed that states can use consensus definitions and common programming instructions to produce detailed statistics on the scope and operation of correctional education and the characteristics of participants (Klein & Tolbert, 2004). States have sophisticated databases containing highly detailed inmate-level information. These contain current information on hundreds of indicators, many related to correctional education, and state administrators noted that states have considerable flexibility in how they analyze correctional education data. Further, it is possible to account for a substantial proportion of the nation's inmates by looking at a relatively small number of states chosen for their demographic makeup. For example, the eight states participating in the feasibility study account for more than one-third of the total U.S. prison population. Enlarging this picture would require adding data from only a few more carefully selected states.

State administrative policies, however, can limit analysis. For example, states use different criteria to classify prison facilities, inmates, inmates wait-

listed for programs, parole violators, and inmate educational placements. Some do not collect data from private facilities. States also vary in the degree to which they verify inmates' self-reported educational level and in their testing procedures for assigning inmates to classes.

Finally, state correctional databases are often isolated from other state databases, making it difficult to assess ex-offenders' reintegration into the community by way of employment, earnings, education, military service, and similar measures.

By coordinating their data collection strategies, however, states can develop the capacity to share information about exemplary practices, track trends in educational programming and inmate participation, and identify gaps in services and areas in need of improvement. This coordinated effort also offers the possibility of being able eventually to generate a reasonably accurate and detailed picture of correctional education nationwide.

### **The Correctional Education Guidebook and Website**

To promote such coordination, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored the development of a guidebook and website containing recommended strategies for collecting and organizing state correctional education data. Using these resources, states can align their reporting systems voluntarily around an agreed-upon set of definitions and reporting frameworks. The Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website were developed by a working group composed of correctional administrators from 12 states (CA, FL, MD, MO, NC, NJ, NM, NY, OH, PA, TX, and VT) and representatives from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Prisons and Bureau of Justice Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education. Five other states (AZ, CT, MN, OR, MI) contributed advice.

The Correctional Education Data Guidebook and website ([www.cedatane트워크.org](http://www.cedatane트워크.org)) contain a brief discussion of items related to important policy issues in correctional education, such as the educational needs of inmates, their characteristics, and the educational and employment outcomes of participants. Other items focus on costs, staffing, and services provided. This discussion also provides a rationale for collecting the data, questions to be answered to enable legislators to develop more informed correctional education policies, and a description of the data needed to answer those questions.

For each item, the Guidebook and website offer variables and coding instructions for gathering and analyzing data on these issues. As illustrated in the following example, coding instructions include the variable name, field length, variable type, description, and response coding.

Completed GED Name: COMPGED Element Type: Numeric Length: 2

Indicates whether or not inmate earned a GED credential or alternative certificate of high school completion, either by passing a required test or fulfilling coursework requirements during current incarceration.

**Coding:**

- 1 – No, inmate still enrolled or enrolled but did not complete
- 2 – Yes, inmate earned GED during current incarceration
- 7 – Not Applicable, inmate never enrolled
- 8 – Missing
- 9 – Information Not Collected

The purpose of the Guidebook is to build consensus around a common language for gathering and reporting state correctional education data. A common language will:

- Help states share information about practices, trends, and areas needing improvement.
- Facilitate the collection of correctional education data at the national level.
- Improve the quality and accuracy of national research.
- Make it easier to establish a clearer link between correctional education and recidivism.
- Improve reporting to policymakers about the status and benefits of correctional education. The website is a dissemination tool that also permits targeted searches of the Guidebook.

In summary, federal and state corrections agencies presently collect a great deal of information, but these data often languish in databases for a number of reasons, at least partly because they are not comparable across states. Coordinating federal and state data collection efforts using common reporting tools can help improve the validity, reliability, and usefulness of correctional education data, while also reducing the costs and burdens associated with data collection. In the end, the goal is better and more comprehensive data about correctional education, leading to more informed policy decisions about assisting one of our country's most disadvantaged populations.



## References

- Aos, S., Miller, M. & Drake, E. (2006). Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Coley, R. & Barton, P. (2006). *Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Klein, S., Tolbert, M., Bugarin, R., Cataldi, E. & Tauschek, G. (2004). *Correctional Education: Assessing the Status of Prison Programs and Information Needs*. Berkeley, CA: MPR Associates, Inc.(www.mprinc.com)
- Klein, S. & Tolbert, M. (2004). *Correctional Education: Common Measures of Performance: Using State Data to Assess the Status of Correctional Education Programs in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: MPR Associates, Inc.(www.mprinc.com)
- Steurer, S. & Smith, L. (2003). *Education Reduces Crime: Three-State Recidivism Study*. Centerville, UT: Management and Training Corporation.
- Travis, J & Waul, M., eds. (2004). *Prisoners Once Removed*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- U. S. Department of Justice. (1990, 1995, and 2000). *Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Department of Justice. (1991 and 1997). *Survey of Inmates of State and Federal Correctional Facilities*. Washington, DC: Author.

## Biographical Sketches

---

**STEVEN KLEIN** is program director, Education for College and Careers, at MPR Associates. His expertise includes performance measures and standards, design of educational accountability systems, and program evaluation. Contact information:

Steven Klein  
10505 SW Hedlund Avenue  
Portland, OR 97219  
Phone/fax: 503-675-6619  
Email: sklein@mprinc.com

**MICHELLE TOLBERT** is associate director, Adult Education and Literacy, at MPR Associates. Her expertise includes correctional education, adult education, literacy, and workforce development. Contact information:

Michelle Tolbert  
MPR Associates, Inc.  
2401 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20037  
Phone: 202-478-1027, ext 109 Fax: 202-466-6996  
Email: mtolbert@mprinc.com

Please send all correspondence to Michelle Tolbert.

Copyright of Journal of Correctional Education is the property of Correctional Education Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.