

# BEYOND THE HEADLINES

## At a Glance: Jobs, Workers & the Economy

FEBRUARY 2012 | FOCUS: U.S., WASHINGTON STATE

### Educational Attainment, Employment and Incarceration

#### PART 1 of 2

The sizable prison population in the U.S. (as well as in Washington State) and the associated costs to the taxpayer are the subject of frequent reporting. While incarceration rates have been dropping since 2007, stiffer sentencing guidelines beginning in the 1980's have sent long-term incarceration rates soaring. By 2010, roughly one in 200 U.S. residents were incarcerated in state or federal prison (about one in 107 U.S. males)<sup>i</sup>.

In this two-part BEYOND THE HEADLINES, we will look at the nexus of educational attainment, employment and incarceration. The February edition examines the correlation between educational attainment and employment in terms of who goes to prison and who returns to prison once released (recidivates). The March edition will examine post-release employment patterns among offenders, including the impact of correctional postsecondary educational programs on recidivism and employment rates.

#### U.S.

While somewhat dated, the following data on the U.S. prison population is taken from arguably the most comprehensive analysis of educational attainment, employment and incarceration, compiled in 2003 by Caroline Wolf Harlow of the Bureau of Justice Statistics<sup>ii</sup>. According to the analysis:

#### Educational Attainment for Correctional Population <sup>(a)</sup> vs. General Population

Educational Attainment	Incarcerated	General Population
Some High School or Less (no diploma)	41.3%	18.4%
GED	23.4%	NA
High School Diploma	22.6%	33.2%
Postsecondary/Some college	12.7%	48.4%

(a) Includes state and federal prison inmates, local jail inmates and probationers

**Inmates had far less educational attainment than the general population.**

While many had completed a GED (often while incarcerated), few had graduated from high school and fewer still had attended college.

**Economic Characteristics Prior to Arrest –  
State Prison Inmates**

		Less than HS Diploma	GED	HS Diploma	Post-secondary/ Some college
<b>Employment Status in month before arrest</b>	Full-time	47.7%	56.4%	63.8%	69.9%
	Part-time	14.8%	11.9%	11.3%	9.0%
	Looking for Work	17.4%	13.1%	11.0%	7.8%
	Not Looking for Work	20.2%	18.6%	13.9%	13.2%
<b>Personal Income in month before arrest</b>	Less than \$1,000	63.6%	51.7%	47.4%	32.7%
	\$1,000 – \$1,999	21.6%	25.9%	29.5%	28.7%
	\$2,000 – \$4,999	8.9%	13.2%	14.6%	24.8%
	\$5,000 or more	6.3%	9.2%	8.5%	13.8%
<b>Homeless in year before admission</b>		11.6%	10.6%	10.0%	8.2%

**Inmates had high levels of unemployment prior to arrest, which increased as their educational attainment levels decreased.**

Of all inmates, 17% were unemployed at arrest (in the same time period, unemployment rates for the general population ranged from only 4.9% to 7.5%)<sup>iii</sup>. Inmates with less than a high school diploma experienced an unemployment rate of 22% prior to arrest, compared to 9% for inmates with education beyond high school. Low earnings and incidence of homelessness followed a similar pattern as unemployment.

**Less educated inmates were more likely to be recidivists.**

As shown in the table below, more than 77% of inmates with less than a high school diploma had served a prior sentence, compared to about 66% of inmates with some college.

**Inmates with Prior Sentences by Educational Attainment –  
State Prison Inmates**

	Less than HS Diploma	GED	HS Diploma	Post-secondary/ Some college
Served a Prior Sentence	77.3%	81.2%	71.3%	66.2%

## WASHINGTON STATE

Washington State has also produced data on the educational attainment levels and unemployment rates of offenders prior to their admission to prison<sup>iv</sup>.

**Inmates had very high levels of unemployment prior to admission, with rates soaring during the great recession.**

The unemployment rate for Washington inmates one year prior to admission was:

- 28% in 2001
- 67% in 2008

**Prior to incarceration, inmates' average wage was just over half that of the general population.**

In 2008, the average hourly wage for Washington offenders prior to incarceration was \$13.38 per hour, compared to the state average of \$22.39 per hour for all workers.

**At incarceration, inmates had much lower levels of educational attainment than the general population in the state.**

At incarceration, approximately 59% of offenders in Washington State had less than a 12th grade education level, compared to about 10% of the state's general population<sup>v</sup>.

- 
- i. Glaze, Lauren E. *Correctional Population in the U.S. 2010* (NCJ 236319). U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.bjs.gov>
  - ii. Harlow, Caroline Wolf. *Education and Correctional Populations* (NCJ 195670). U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (January 2003).
  - iii. Because labor statistics exclude persons "Not looking for work", the unemployment rate is individuals "Looking for work" as a percentage of all individuals working or looking for work ("Full-time", "Part-time", and "Looking for work").
  - iv. Washington State Department of Corrections, *Tracking Washington State Offenders Pilot Study: Do Education Programs Affect Employment Outcomes?* Principal author Michael Evans, Research Analyst Susan Koenig. March 2011.
  - v. Adults aged 25+. U.S. Census Bureau at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>.

**BEYOND THE HEADLINES:** Policy & Labor Market Updates for Those Working to Help Low-Income and Low-Skill Individuals Advance through Education, Training & Living-Wage Jobs

### About Seattle Jobs Initiative

Seattle Jobs Initiative creates opportunities for students, workers and business to succeed by helping education and job training programs meet the demands of a new economy. We find and apply solutions for people to gain the skills they need for good jobs that create prosperity for all in today's marketplace.

**Supported by the City of Seattle Office of Economic Development**

### Contact Information

For questions or suggestions, please email David Kaz, SJI Director of Policy and Development at: [dkaz@seattlejobsinit.com](mailto:dkaz@seattlejobsinit.com)