CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

COMMON MEASURES OF PERFORMANCE: Using State Data to Assess the Status of Correctional Education Programs in the United States

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Overview

Correctional education programs can equip prisoners with the skills necessary for career and life success. Although the magnitude of program outcomes has yet to be conclusively documented, studies indicate that participants have lower rates of recidivism and earn higher wages than those not receiving educational services. [1]

Though there is compelling evidence of the benefits of prison instruction, state investments in correctional education programs have not kept pace with growing prison populations. While reliable data on state program expenditures are not currently collected, national data indicate that the proportion of prisoners participating in correctional education programs fell between 1991 and 1997.[2]

Declining participation rates suggest that legislators and the public are not adequately informed about the fiscal and societal benefits conferred by prison education programs. Increasing support for correctional instruction will require producing better, more timely information about the status and outcomes of prison services.

Developing a Common Reporting Framework

Existing federal surveys provide limited information about correctional education. As a consequence, important questions about program operations and outcomes remain unanswered, making it difficult to compare the return on correctional investment with that of other adult education and job training services.

State correctional agencies routinely collect detailed statistics on correctional education. If aggregated across states, these data could tell a compelling story about the benefits of prison instruction. Shared data also could support program improvement efforts by helping state administrators identify exemplary programs and practices.

Unfortunately, state information systems have evolved in isolation from one another, leading to differences in how states define key terms and collect information. This has, to date, complicated efforts to assess the status of prison education programs nationwide.

To determine the feasibility of developing a common state reporting framework, the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education, asked MPR researchers to collaborate with

correctional education administrators in eight states—Arizona, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas—to formulate common definitions and programming instructions using existing state data. Administrators were then asked to produce data on selected indicators, using the consensus variables, to test the potential for aggregating information across states.

This report summarizes states' experiences test-running data using the new, common programming instructions. The report begins with an overview of the study methodology, followed by a discussion of key findings from the state data processing efforts. It concludes with an assessment of the potential for using existing state data to produce policy-relevant, national estimates of the scope and effectiveness of correctional education programs.

Study Methodology

In Fall 2003, MPR researchers identified a set of ten indicators that could be used to assess instructional programs offered in state and federal prisons. Initial efforts to use these indicators were frustrated by a lack of data at the federal level, which precluded answering even basic questions about the type of coursework, level of inmate participation, and number of inmates who completed instruction.

To determine if state data could be used to generate data on the proposed indicators, MPR researchers collaborated with correctional administrators from eight states to review existing state data elements and answer a set of specific questions, including:

- How are state correctional education data collected and organized?
- Can a set of common definitions and reporting procedures be instituted across states?
- Are states capable of reporting valid data for selected program indicators?
- What are the benefits and limitations of using state data to assess program operation?

This section summarizes the methodology used to collect and analyze state data.

Study Methodology

Eight states—Arizona, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas—were recruited for the study, based on the composition of their correctional databases, geographic diversity, and interest in the project. At least one data analyst from each state served on the study's working group, along with representatives from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the National Institute for Correctional Education.

Members of the working group were convened in a series of conference calls in which indicators were reviewed and modified and data issues were discussed. State data analysts also produced tables for selected indicators and provided feedback on their experiences running the data. Some states, however, we were unable to report data for each indicator.[3]

Standardizing Terminology

Although correctional education programs are offered in most federal and state prisons and some local jails, data analysis was restricted to coursework offered in state and privately administered prisons. Study populations also were limited to inmates in state custody—those physically housed in a state facility—as opposed to those under state jurisdiction (i.e., under the legal authority of a state, but incarcerated elsewhere).

To kickoff the project, MPR researchers collected and analyzed state data dictionaries to create a set of common definitions and analysis tools. The working group reviewed these materials and, in a series of conference calls, suggested changes to more closely align terminology with states' database structures. A revised set of programming procedures were subsequently developed and circulated to state administrators for final comment and use.

Analyzing the Data

To assess the utility of the programming instructions, state administrators were asked to analyze their existing data and complete a set of tables documenting the scope of state prison systems and inmate participation in, and completion of, correctional education programs. These tables accounted for five out of the ten proposed indicators. To avoid burdening the states, state administrators were not asked to report on the remaining indicators.

States were asked to run and submit data for the following indicators:

- **State Correctional Facilities and Inmates**—The number of public and private prison facilities and inmates incarcerated.
- **Highest Educational Degree/Credential on Admission**—Inmate-reported data on the highest level of education completed as of their most recent prison admission.

- **Correctional Education Program Offerings**—The type of correctional education programs offered within facilities.
- **Participation by Educational Attainment**—Inmate participation in prison correctional education programs based on their educational background.
- **Credential or Certificate Completion**—The number of inmates completing a prison-based education program offering a recognized credential.

The working group reviewed the compiled state data and, in a series of follow-up calls, examined the reporting process and made suggestions for improving the reliability of subsequent analyses.

A Word of Caution

Study activities were solely intended to assess the feasibility of using existing state data to monitor prison-based correctional education programs. Although state data are used to illustrate findings throughout the report, study definitions have not been subjected to official review or approval, and consequently may not accurately capture all aspects of state programs. Therefore, readers should not use exploratory data from this report to draw conclusions about the current status or operations of state correctional programs.

What Did We Learn?

1. States have sophisticated database systems

State administrative record systems contain highly detailed, inmate-level data that can be used to assess the status and outcomes of correctional education programs. Facility data often are used to track individuals through the criminal justice system and to assess the scope and effectiveness of prison services. Statistics also may be used in annual reports, to respond to legislative requests for information, or to inform program improvement efforts.

States are Capable of Producing Comparable Educational Data

Since state prison information systems are designed for similar administrative purposes, there are often common data elements across states. Data programmers were generally able to align their existing state data with the consensus definitions developed by the working group. Specifically, states were able to report the number of inmates who enrolled in and completed the following education programs:

- ***Adult Basic Education (ABE)—***Instruction in mathematics, reading, writing, and English literacy.
- ***Adult Secondary Education (ASE)—***Preparation for the General Educational Development (GED) test or alternative certificate of high school completion.
- ***Vocational Programs—***Job training or industry skill certification for employment.
- ***Life Skills/Cognitive Restructuring/Transition—***Personal skills (e.g., anger management, personal responsibility, impulse control) or social skills (e.g., parenting, money management, health).
- ***Postsecondary Coursework***—Advanced instruction enabling inmates to earn college credit toward a two-year or four-year degree.
- ***Other***—Any educational program that does not fall into specified program areas.

States also were able to supply information on prisoner participation in educational programs, controlling for inmates' characteristics and incarceration status.

Examples of State Prison Data

Prison Educational Training
Program offerings; start/end dates; testing gains; certification; numbers wait-listed

Inmate Characteristics
Gender; race; age; SSN; educational attainment; academic test scores at entry, program participation

Incarceration Status
Offense; sentence length; recidivist

Where necessary, states were able to recode variables to conform to reporting formats. For example, Texas, which assigns prisoners into literacy classes based on inmates' composite Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores, recoded three instructional levels into two—Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (ASE)—to align instructional programs with common definitions identified in the study.

As might be expected, states' capacity to produce comparable data was inversely related to the specificity of data requests. While all states were able to produce counts of inmates and facilities, comparability became more difficult to achieve as states were asked to report on subpopulations of inmates, specific outcomes of educational programs, and results at specific points in time.

State Databases Contain Highly Detailed Information

Each participating state collects detailed, inmate-level data on individuals participating in prison educational programs. Disaggregating this data, controlling for prison or inmate characteristics, can provide useful and timely information about the status and scope of prison education programs.

Table 1 **Percentage of males currently incarcerated in state prison who held a degree/credential upon admission, by state: 2003**

		Percentage of males entering prison with:					
	Number	No diploma	GED	High school diploma	2-year degree or certificate	4-year degree	Unknown
Florida	72,250	*	15.5*	2.4*	*	*	82.5*
Maryland	14,254	*	*	*	*	*	100.0
New York	63,161	44.4	27.3	9.9	1.0	0.5	16.9
Ohio	43,217	*	*	13.7	*	*	86.3
Oregon	11,685	47.8	30.2	19.6	1.3	1.1	0.0
Texas	288,348	29.6	21.6	13.0	0.8	0.4	34.6

*Florida data reflects the degree/credential holdings of their status population enrolled in correctional education, not the degree/credential holdings of their general population upon admission; Maryland collects data on pre-incarceration degree/credential holdings from correctional education participants only; Ohio collects degree/credential data on all inmates upon admission, but data was not accessible due to a database transition effort.

NOTE: Due to the timing used for Table 1, Arizona was unable to provide reliable data.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

To determine state reporting capacity, administrators were asked to assess inmates' self-reported educational attainment as a function of personal characteristics (e.g., sex, race-ethnicity) and incarceration status (e.g., length of sentence). With some exception, states were able to report detailed information on inmate subpopulations; for example, the number of males who held a secondary or postsecondary diploma, degree, or certificate when they entered prison (Table 1).

Notable differences in state reporting capacities did surface. For example, unlike some states, Florida and Ohio test the academic skill of all inmates entering the prison system. However, while Ohio also collects and verifies degree information for all inmates, Florida only reports degree information for inmates participating in correctional education. Most other pilot states can report degree information for their general prison population, but only test inmates upon enrollment in a correctional education program.

As a consequence, it is currently impossible to assess the level of educational attainment for the general prison population across states using degree attainment at entry as the unit of analysis. Degree attainment may serve as a basis for comparison, however, if analysis is restricted to inmates participating in correctional instruction. As will be discussed later, use of inmates' academic test scores to assess the actual level of inmates' abilities is complicated by differences in state tests and testing components that prevent aggregation of data across states.

Pilot State Data Account for a Large Proportion of U.S. Prisoners

To align correctional education program reporting, state administrators were asked to report on total statewide inmate populations on the last day of the prison school year (but no later than June 30, 2002). States were given some flexibility to account for programs operating on quarter or semester systems.

The prison population totals in participating states accounted for a sizeable portion of the U.S. prison population. Specifically, the seven states providing data reported housing 393,653 inmates at mid-year, more than one-third of the total U.S. prison population in 2002 (Table 2).[4]

By taking advantage of state demographics, it should be possible to account for a substantial proportion of the nation's inmates with the addition of only a small number of states.

Table 2 **Number of custodial prisoners in pilot project states and as a percentage of Department of Justice custodial counts: 2002**

	Pilot states custodial counts	Department of Justice custodial counts	Pilot states as percentage of Department of Justice custodial counts
Total	393,653	1,155,073*	34.1
Arizona	27,921	29,359	95.1
Florida	73,553	75,210	97.8
Maryland	23,769	23,987	99.1
New York	66,857	66,925	99.9
Ohio	44,615	43,357	102.9
Oregon	11,824	11,650	101.5
Texas	145,114	135,673	107.0

*Count includes all prisoners in custody of state correctional authorities in the U.S.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics and Pilot States.

2. State administrative policies affect reporting capacities

Although standardizing definitions and programming instructions can increase the comparability of state data, state administrative policies can constrain analyses of correctional education outcomes.

States Use Different Criteria to Classify Facilities

For study purposes, a prison is defined as a confinement facility administered by the state or by a private corporation contracting with the state to house adult inmates with a minimum sentence of one year.[5] While this definition enabled database programmers to select prisons housing comparable populations of inmates, during discussions it became apparent that states use different criteria to designate facilities.

Some states define prison facilities based on their location, meaning that multiple, self-contained units at a single site are considered a single entity. Others, such as Maryland, define facilities based on their bureaucratic organization, with specific programs or housing subcategories at a single location counted separately if they have their own administrative structure.

As can be seen in Table 3, Florida, which has a population of inmates just over half as large as that of Texas, reported nearly 20 percent more facilities, a finding resulting in part from differences in facility definitions and in part from the relatively small size of prisons in the state.

Table 3 **Number of state correctional facilities: 2003**

	Number of facilities			Number of inmates		
	State	Private	Total	State	Private	Total
Total	360	28	388	385,745	19,763	405,508
Arizona	10	3	13	28,465	2,312	30,777
Florida	115	8	123	73,122	4,194	77,316
Maryland	28	3	31	23,799	121	23,920
New York	70	0	70	66,098	0	66,098
Ohio	32	2	34	44,236	1,934	46,170
Oregon	12	0	12	12,526	0	12,526
Texas	93	12	105	137,499	11,202	148,701

SOURCE: Pilot States.

Standardizing state definitions to permit comparisons of inmate or educational programs to facility ratios, while technically feasible, may be statistically unwarranted. Since ratios are sensitive to distributional characteristics, differences in the size of institutions within states may lead to incorrect conclusions when averages are applied across states. For example, if a state has five programs with 100 inmates, four with 120 inmates, and one with 2,000 inmates, the ratio will be (500+480+2000)/10 = 298 inmates for each program, a figure that does not reflect the reality of any program in the state.

To avoid inappropriate and potentially misleading comparisons, analysis of correctional education programs should focus on outcomes gleaned from inmate-level data, rather than statewide ratios generated from facility-level data.

Some States Do Not Collect Data from Private Facilities

A number of states contract with outside vendors to house inmates in privately operated, for-profit prisons. Of the states providing data, five—Arizona, Florida, Maryland, Ohio, and Texas—reported contracting with private companies in 2003. Although the number of private prisons continues to increase, private institutions housed less than 5 percent of the total inmate population in study states (Table 4).

Some states were able to report only generalized statistics on education programs offered in private prisons. For example, although Texas can report on the number of inmates incarcerated in private facilities, it does not collect data on inmates participating in instructional programs within them. Florida and Ohio, in contrast, were able to provide detailed statistics on inmates participating in educational programs, irrespective of where they were housed.

Although both state and private prisons provide inmates with access to educational services, little is known about programs offered in private facilities. Given the trend toward privatizing prisons, states contracting with private companies should require these companies to report additional data at the inmate level. Without such information, it will be impossible to fully document the status and outcomes of correctional education nationwide.

Correctional Information Systems are often Isolated from other State Databases

Much of the benefit of correctional education accrues after prisoners return to society. Quantifying program results requires that states be able to monitor inmates participating in instructional programs while they are incarcerated, as well as to track their outcomes after they are released.

Nearly all states collect inmates' Social Security numbers (SSN), so state administrators should be able to match prison records electronically against other state administrative databases. However, state matching capacity is affected by various factors, including the accuracy of inmate-reported SSN, quality of centralized databases in other agencies, the reliability and use of SSN as a unique identifier within these databases, state technical capacity to conduct matches, and state privacy laws.

Table 4 **Percentage of state prison inmates housed in private facilities: Mid-year 2003**

	Total state inmates	Private facility inmates	Percent
Study states	405,508	19,763	4.9
Arizona	30,777	2,312	7.5
Florida	77,316	4,194	5.4
Maryland	23,920	121	0.5
New York	66,098	0	0.0
Ohio	46,170	1,934	4.2
Oregon	12,526	0	0.0
Texas	148,701	11,202	7.5

SOURCE: Pilot States.

Tracking inmates across state agencies can provide a wealth of information about ex-offenders' reintegration into the community. Prison administrators in Florida, for example, have access to a state data clearinghouse—The Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program—containing detailed information on employment, earnings, education, welfare, military service, and other data that can be used to track offenders after they are released. Similar data is available to state administrators in other states; states may need to pay a fee to access this information, as is the case in Maryland and Oregon.

States have Difficulty Assessing Recidivism

To assess state capacity to track recidivists, state administrators were asked to report on inmates' prior incarceration status at the time of their most recent confinement.

While state administrators were generally confident of their ability to identify recidivists previously incarcerated within their state, they were unable to distinguish between first-time offenders in their state and repeat offenders previously incarcerated out of state. Other factors affecting recidivism counts included how states classify parole or technical violators, whether states have the capacity to track parolees retrospectively, and whether state databases include a field for recidivism measures.

As illustrated in Table 5, recidivism rates varied across states. Overall, state reported rates were lower than those reported elsewhere: according to a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics publication, nationwide, about 75 percent of state prison inmates had a prior sentence to probation or incarceration in 1997.[6] The low recidivism rates reported by the pilot states likely reflect the difficulty administrators have in collecting accurate data.

Improving state reporting will require developing interstate record-sharing agreements or a national database accessible to state administrators, using a unique inmate identifier to structure matches. If individuals who complete educational programs are less likely to become recidivists, as studies suggest, then more reliable data is needed to support researchers in quantifying the return on investment for prison-based instruction.

Table 5 **Number of inmates by incarceration status and percent recidivist: 2003**

	Florida	Maryland	New York	Oregon
Total inmates	77,316	23,920	66,098	12,526
First-time prisoner	40,818	7,346	41,091	8,337
Recidivist	36,492	16,424*	25,007	3,898
Unknown	6	150	0	291
Percent recidivist	47.2	68.7	37.8	33.1

*Maryland's recidivist numbers include both juvenile and adult facilities.

NOTE: Due to the timing and definition used for recidivism, Texas and Arizona were unable to produce reliable numbers. Ohio collects recidivism data, but data were not available due to a state database transition effort.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

3. Differences in state definitions, placement policies, and collection procedures can complicate, but not invalidate, the development of comparable data

State correctional education programs have evolved to serve similar purposes within unique state contexts. While fundamental differences in how correctional systems are organized and educational services delivered can complicate standardization efforts, database administrators have some latitude in recoding variables to match consensus definitions.

States Verify Educational Attainment for Different Populations of Inmates

Upon prison entry, inmates are requested to provide information on their highest level of educational attainment before incarceration. State correctional administrators verify (i.e., check) a relatively high percentage of inmates' claims to en-

sure that inmates are placed in the appropriate courses and to prevent them from fraudulently enrolling in coursework to avoid other prison assignments. Verifying educational claims also helps states abide by their mandatory education laws, which require inmates scoring below a certain grade level or lacking a GED certificate to attend correctional education courses while in prison.

States do not attempt to verify the educational status of inmates who reported that they were dropouts or who were not asked their educational attainment level at intake. In some states, such as Florida, where all inmates are tested when they enter the prison, verification is further limited to inmates participating in correctional education programs. In all other pilot study states, efforts were made during the intake process to verify the attainment of inmates claiming an educational diploma, degree, or certificate (Table 6).

Conversations with state correctional administrators suggest that inmate-reported education data are generally valid, so it may be possible to extrapolate from state attainment data—verified and unverified—to assess the degree holdings of incoming inmates. Further, since nearly all states attempt to verify the educational attainment of inmates participating in educational programs, analyses of prison instructional programs should provide fairly accurate information.

The most difficult hurdle in comparing state educational attainment will be resolving differences in state policies and resources. Florida, for example, tests inmates at admission using TABE and later, as part of the school enrollment process, verifies degrees and certificates claimed by inmates before their incarceration. Officials in Maryland also tested inmates at admission, but the state has had to stop testing all inmates upon intake for financial reasons. Consequently, differences in state approaches undercut the comparability of certain data elements.

The Content of Education Programs may Differ Across States

Whether assessment is conducted at intake or when an inmate enrolls in a correctional education program, all states use the results of standardized tests to assign inmates to education programs. States have, however, set different scoring thresholds to determine program placement, meaning that inmates with different abilities may be classified into program areas bearing similar titles.

For example, although both Florida and Texas use the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to assign inmates into academic programs, students in Florida scoring 9.0 or above are assigned into Adult Secondary Education (ASE) instruction. Texas, in contrast, assigns students scoring 6.0 or above into similarly labeled coursework (Table 7).

Differences in how inmates are assigned have implications for program outcomes. States with relatively high thresholds for ASE participation, such as Florida and New York, may appear to have higher completion or GED certificate rates than states such as Texas, whose ASE programs serve a more educationally challenged population.

Table 6 **Number and percentage of inmates' degrees verified at admission, by degree level: 2003**

	Florida	New York	Ohio	Oregon	Texas
Total inmates	77,316	66,098	46,170	12,526	136,594
No degree	*	29,494	*	5,944	55,498
Degree reported					
GED or high school diploma	13,401**	24,703	6,383*	6,274	62,634
Percent verified	100.0**	95.4	100.0	99.5	79.4
Postsecondary	*	1,007	*	308	2,233
Percent verified	*	90.5	*	100.0	99.6
Unknown degree	63,915**	10,894	39,786	0	16,229
Percent unknown	82.7**	16.5	86.2	0.0	11.9

*Data not collected; due to a database transition effort, Ohio was only able to report the number of correctional education participants with a high school diploma at admission.
**Florida's data reflects the degree/credential holding of their status population enrolled in correctional education, not the degree/credential holdings of the general population upon admission.

NOTE: Due to the timing used for Table 6, Arizona was unable to produce reliable numbers. Maryland was unable to provide data for Table 6 because it only collects data on pre-incarceration degree/credential holdings from correctional education participants, not the general inmate population.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

Table 7 **State tests and the scores used to assign inmates into academic programs**

		Course assignment based on inmate scores		
State	**Test**	**ABE**	**Pre-ASE**	**ASE**
Arizona	TABE	<8.0		>=8.0
Florida	TABE	<9.0		>=9.0
Maryland	TABE	<9.0		>=9.0
	CASAS	<=235		>235
New York	TABE	<6.0	6.0–8.9	>=9.0
Ohio	CASAS	<6.0	6.0–8.9	>=9.0
Oregon	CASAS	<=235		>235
Texas	TABE	<3.9	4.0–5.9	>=6.0

SOURCE: Pilot States.

States also report using different testing components within academic assessments to assign inmates into classes. For example, some states are using the TABE reading and writing subtests to determine inmate placements, while others are using TABE reading and math or the TABE Locator. States also may employ different tests to assess inmates, such as the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) used by Oregon. Unless test developers crosswalk scoring thresholds across exams, it is difficult to determine the relative skills of state inmate populations.

In addition to differences in tests and testing components, the actual seat time required to complete programs may vary from state to state. For example, a Life Skills seminar may consist of a 2-hour class in one state, versus a 6-week commitment in another. Given that the difference in intensity of coursework may affect student outcomes, including seat time in future data collections would be useful.

Tracking inmate participation with special needs can also complicate analyses. For example, out of the eight states participating in the study, New York was the only state that instructs learning disabled and English as a Second Language (ESOL) inmates separately at all literacy levels. Differences in how these inmates are assigned have implications for program outcomes. For example, states that mix learning disabled and ESOL inmates into their ABE and ASE classes may appear to have lower completion rates because these inmates often require more instruction to make the same gains as other inmates.

Despite these differences, existing state data can be used to assess the scope and outcomes of educational offerings across states. By controlling for inmates' personal characteristics, it is also possible to assess states' relative success in educating inmate subpopulations.

States Use Different Criteria to Classify Inmates

States have adopted various strategies for classifying inmates' racial-ethnic background, meaning that subpopulations may include individuals from several different racial-ethnic groups. For example, as shown in Table 8, Texas, for security reasons, limits its racial classification system to white, Hispanic, and black inmates; Asian or Pacific Islanders are classified as white, complicating comparisons of inmate populations across states. Differences in how states classify individuals of mixed race or 'Other' races can further undercut analyses.

A review of state data dictionaries suggests that local prison administrators also have some discretion in how they code ethnic minorities into racial categories, thus undermining data comparability across and even within states.

Since adding variable codes to existing fields is not feasible in all states, one solution would be to identify a truncated set of race-ethnic codes into which states with multiple fields could recode their data. For example, states collecting data on American Indian/Alaskans could recode them as white to create comparable populations across states. States collecting data with finer levels of detail, however, should be encouraged to continue this practice, both to accommodate regional differences and to support statewide program improvement efforts.

The effect of recoding minority groups into other groups should have minimal consequences at the national level. Analysis of inmate race-ethnic data indicates that American Indian/Alaskans and Asian/Pacific Islanders made up a rela-

Table 8 **Number of inmates possessing a high school diploma at admission, by race/ethnicity: 2003**

	Florida*	New York	Ohio	Oregon	Texas
High school diploma	1,786	6,278	6,372	2,466	29,629
White	715	2,392	3,701	2,103	10,592
Black	976	3,114	2,590	216	14,265
Hispanic	90	574	55	69	4,596
American Indian/Alaskan	2	27	0	41	0
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	53	18	36	0
Other	2	568	8	1	176

*Florida's data reflects the degree/credential holding of their status population enrolled in correctional education, not the degree/credential holdings of the general population upon admission.

NOTE: Due to the timing used for Table 8, Arizona was unable to provide reliable numbers. Maryland was unable to provide data for Table 8 because it only collects data on pre-incarceration degree/credential holdings from correctional education participants, not the general inmate population.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

tively small proportion of the overall prison population in participating states.

States Assess Inmate Educational Participation at Different Points in Time

To ensure that inmates who dropped out of coursework were excluded from course counts, state administrators were asked to process data as of the last day of classes, but no later than June 30 of the prison academic year.

The timing of measurement is crucial if correctional education data are to be shared across states. Standardizing data on inmate participation in correctional programs requires stipulating a reporting window within which states can assess inmate participation rates. Ideally, this window is established late enough in the academic year to exclude inmates who begin and subsequently drop out of educational programs.

Four states—Maryland, Florida, Ohio, and Texas—reported enrollment data collected as of June 30, 2003, which corresponds with the timing of federal data collection to assess inmate populations at mid-year.[7] In contrast, New York used May 11, 2003 and Oregon used June 6, 2003 for study purposes. Arizona was not able to comply with the timing of measurement for all the indicators.

Enrollment data indicate only that inmates were scheduled to attend courses. If there are significant gaps in prison databases between the number of inmates identified as enrolled in programs and the number actually attending courses, then assessment of correctional education outcomes may be inaccurate. To ensure accurate measurement, states should continue to track course enrollments throughout the program to account for inmates who may have enrolled in a program and dropped out prior to completion.

States with more sophisticated tracking systems can make an important contribution by assessing the effect of attendance on program outcomes. For example, data on average daily attendance, which some states such as Oregon currently collect, could be used to determine whether inmates who participate more intensively are more likely to complete programs and realize greater post-program benefits. These state systems also can serve as a model for other states seeking to improve the quality of their correctional educational data.

States Use Different Conventions to Classify Inmates Wait-listed for Services

Not all prisoners eligible for educational services enroll in classes. Because of resource constraints, inmates in need of services may be wait-listed until a class vacancy becomes available. The existence of long wait-lists also may discourage some inmates from attempting to enroll in correctional education. As a consequence, the use of current state wait-list data may not accurately reflect the number of inmates needing or desiring services.

How states classify inmates for course participation has implications for the interpretation of state data. Using ASE coursework as an example, both Florida and Oregon appear to have substantially more demand for high school equivalency coursework than other states (Table 9). However, these states' wait-lists include all inmates with identified skill deficits, irrespective of whether they seek program services.

Table 9 **Educational programs offered in state and private prisons and the number of inmates participating or wait-listed in classes: 2003**

	Florida	Maryland	New York	Ohio	Oregon	Texas
ABE						
Inmates participating	4,914	1,726	3,790	6,519	462	8,455
Inmates wait-listed	16,290	840	*	*	1,957	*
Percent wait-listed	77.0	33.0	*	*	81.0	*

*Ohio collects wait-list data, but data was not accessible due to a database transition effort. New York and Texas were unable to provide wait-list data because information was not archived for earlier years.

NOTE: Arizona was unable to provide data for Table 9.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

In comparison, Maryland limits its wait-list to inmates who have applied to participate, but have been denied entry due to space constraints. While this approach may fail to account for inmates who have not applied for course enrollment, for example, because they believe there are too few openings to warrant trying, it can provide important information on unmet demand for prison educational services. Finally, not all states maintain data on inmate wait-lists: New York and Texas were unable to provide data because information was not archived for earlier years.

4. States require clear direction if they are to produce comparable estimates

Conversations with state administrators reveal that states have considerable flexibility in how they analyze correctional education data. Producing comparable state estimates requires providing states with clear direction to assist them in developing common programming procedures.

Program Participation is Affected by the Date Inmates May be Released

To assess educational program outcomes, state administrators were asked to count the number of inmates participating in and completing prison programs at any point since prison admission. Since inmates may take courses at any time during their incarceration period, and may take multiple courses within or across educational programs, the time period specified for data collection affects the size of reported populations.

In some states, inmate access to prison services is a function of incarceration status: inmates closer to release are more likely to be enrolled in educational courses. Inmates with lengthy prison sentences are also more likely to be double-counted if they enroll in one or more courses during their prison sentence.

To control for the effect of inmates' sentences and duration of incarceration, researchers should seek to isolate inmates participating in coursework during a specific academic year or those admitted during a specific time period. For the purposes of this study, states were only asked to provide overall participation counts for inmates (Table 10), reducing the use of this information for policy purposes.

Table 10 **Number of inmates ever participating in and completing prison programs during current incarceration: 2003**

	Arizona	Florida	Maryland	New York	Ohio	Oregon
Total						
Number participating	25,707	39,285	11,330	60,631	30,832	10,723
Number completing	11,520	21,148	2,469	51,581	7,490	9,504
Number dropping out	5,263	23,722	155**	*	*	6,854

*Data not collected.

**Maryland only collects drop-out data on inmates who are still incarerated, but are no longer participating in the program.

SOURCE: Pilot States.

To obtain more accurate outcomes for instruction, participating state analysts also recommended collecting data on both the number of inmates completing programs and the number of degrees or credentials awarded, to control for inmates receiving multiple degrees. Administrators also suggested collecting data on the number of individuals continuing enrollment to provide data on program retention.

States Must Disaggregate Data to Account for Inmate Participation Patterns

To assess educational program outcomes, state administrators were asked to count the number of inmates dropping out of prison programs before completing. Analysis of state data appeared to indicate that a substantial number of inmates fail to complete their education program. During discussions, however, state administrators reported that inmate dropout rates included individuals who voluntarily withdrew from programs, along with those who stopped attending because they were moved, reclassified, or given early release (Table 10).

Although states were not subsequently asked to disaggregate prisoner dropouts by program status, state administrators reported that a substantial number of inmates listed as dropping out were actually administrative transfers unable to remain enrolled in coursework due to institutional factors having little to do with the provision of educational services.

Summary and Next Steps

To make a compelling case for increased support for correctional education, state prison administrators must conclusively document the contribution that correctional education makes to society. Unfortunately, current federal and state data collection efforts do not provide the level of detail legislators need to make more informed funding decisions.

Improving the quality of correctional education data ultimately will strengthen the correctional education community. By coordinating data collection strategies, administrators will be better able to share information about exemplary practices, track trends in programming and inmate participation, and identify gaps in services and areas needing improvement.

By collaborating with state administrators from eight states and representatives from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the National Institute for Correctional Education, MPR researchers were able to

- Verify that states maintain comprehensive administrative databases containing up-to-date, inmate-level information on hundreds of variables, many related to correctional education;
- Develop consensus definitions describing prison facilities, educational programs, and the characteristics of inmates participating in education programs; and
- Assess the ability of states to use standardized definitions to report detailed statistics on the scope and operation of correctional education, as well as the characteristics of program participants.

Although all states collect similar data, small differences in state policies and reporting procedures can undermine the comparability of data across states. For example, though nearly all states collect information on the educational attainment of inmates at prison entry, some restrict analysis to inmates participating in correctional education programs. To increase uniformity, researchers must provide states with clear programming instructions detailing the population of inmates, type of coursework, and timing of services to be used for data analysis.

Study findings offer a promising first step toward developing a common set of indicators for correctional education. However, since the participating states represent neither the range of approaches to correctional education nor the average state capacity to report data on selected indicators, additional state involvement will be required before it is possible to finalize indicator definitions and data processing procedures.

To jump-start this process, the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education, is sponsoring an initiative to develop a guidebook detailing strategies for collecting and organizing state correctional education data. Highlighting the types of data useful for policy-making decisions, the handbook will summarize preferred definitions and coding strategies identified by states in the feasibility study, as well as employed by other researchers for federal reporting requirements.

For additional information on this project, contact:

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NOTES

[1] See, for example: Steurer, S., Smith, L., and Tracy, A. 2001. *Three-State Recidivism Study*. Lanham, MD: Correctional Education Association; or Saylor, W., and Gaes, G. 1997. "Training Inmates through Industrial Work Participation and Vocational and Apprenticeship Instruction." *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 1(2), 32–43.

[2] Harlow, C. 2003. *Education and Correctional Populations*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ 195670.

[3] Minnesota was unable to submit any data due to resource constraints which prevented state administrators from running data. Ohio, which was going through a database transition effort and Arizona, which face similar resource constraints, were able to provide only limited information.

[4] Custodial counts provided by the states are based on data collected in mid-year 2002. Custodial counts reported by the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics are based on data collected in December 2002—the most comparable information available. Growth in the U.S. prison population between June and December 2002 mean that the six states in the study likely accounted for more than 30 percent of the nation's inmates at the time measurement occurred.

[5] This formulation includes prisons, penitentiaries, and correctional institutions; boot camps; prison farms; reception, diagnostic, and classification centers; road camps; forestry and conservation camps; vocational training facilities; prison hospitals; and secure drug and alcohol treatment facilities.

[6] Harlow, C. 2003. op. cit.

[7] See the federal series: Harrison, P., and Karberg, J. 2003. *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ 198877.