

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## *Educational Attainment of Inmates Entering North Carolina's Prisons July 2005*

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According to the most recent report from the Bureau of Justice, as of 1997 approximately 40% of inmates in State prison had not attained a high school education. In addition, the number of inmates that had a high school diploma at entry to prison decreased between 1991 and 1997.<sup>1</sup> Interest in the education level of the incarcerated population is increasing throughout the nation.

The Office of Research and Planning receives numerous requests for information on the educational characteristics of North Carolina inmates from legislators, corrections professionals and academicians. The purpose of this brief is to provide the most current information on the educational profile of inmates entering the North Carolina Department of Correction (DOC) Division of Prisons (DOP).

All inmates entering DOP custody have been adjudicated as adults. For the purposes of this brief inmates aged 19 or older are considered adult inmates and those 18 or younger as youthful inmates. These inmates are considered separately because youthful inmates may not have had an opportunity to complete their basic education prior to entering DOC custody. The numbers that follow pertain to the population of inmates entering North Carolina's prisons at 19 years of age or older except where noted.

### **INMATE EDUCATIONAL PROFILE**

The DOP collects information during the intake process on educational attainment to assess the needs and abilities of inmates so that the division can provide the most appropriate opportunities for inmates to improve their work, educational and/or personal skills. The data are reported to DOP by the inmate and entered into a central database called Offender Population Unified System (OPUS).

### **BRIEF HIGHLIGHTS**

- 52.6% of inmates entering North Carolina's prisons in 2004 claim at least a high school diploma or equivalent.
- The typical inmate entering prison claimed completion of 11<sup>th</sup> grade.
- North Carolina has a higher proportion of inmates entering prison with less than a high school diploma or GED compared to national State prison figures.
- The typical inmate entering NCDOP custody in 2004 reads at 9<sup>th</sup> grade level and can successfully solve mathematics problems at 7<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- The typical youthful inmate entering NCDOP custody in 2004 reads and can successfully solve mathematics problems at 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- The reading ability of inmates entering NC prisons has increased over the past 10 years from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- Entering inmates that claim less than a high school diploma or GED read at 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, inmates that claim at least a high school education read at 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>1</sup> Harlow, BJS 2003 NCJ195670

During calendar year 2004, North Carolina's prisons admitted 23,883 individuals 19 years or older.<sup>2</sup> The typical inmate (based on the median) reported 11 years of education upon entry. Nearly 24% claimed a high school diploma while an additional 21% claimed a general education equivalency certificate (GED).

There were 8,159 inmates that reported 12 or more years of education. Only 8% reported education beyond high school. Overall, nearly 53% of North Carolina's most recently admitted inmates report at least a high school education prior to coming into North Carolina's prisons. Table 1 compares the education level of individuals admitted to North Carolina's prisons during 2004 to the most current national figures for State prisons and the general population in North Carolina.

**Table 1: Claimed education for North Carolina prison entries in 2004, U.S. State prisons inmates and the general population in North Carolina.**

	National Inmates (1997) <sup>1</sup>	NC DOP Entries (2004) <sup>2</sup>	N. C. Population (2000) <sup>3</sup>
Highest Education			
Some High School or Less	39.7%	47.4%	22.4%
GED	28.5%	20.9%	--
High School Diploma	20.5%	23.6%	28.6%
Postsecondary Education	11.4%	8.1%	49.0%

Sources: <sup>1</sup>BJS Education and Correctional Populations: Harlow, 2003; <sup>2</sup> North Carolina Department of Correction OPUS Abstract 2004; <sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau Census 2000 Summary File 3

The percent of inmates entering prison in North Carolina with at least a high school education is lower than the last reported national average within State prisons (60.4%).<sup>1</sup> This percentage is also substantially lower than within the general population of North Carolina (77.6%).<sup>3</sup> Compared to national figures, a smaller percentage of inmates entering prison in 2004 report a GED.

Over the past 10 years the percentage of individuals that reported less than a high school education at entry decreased from a high of 53% in 1995 to 47% in 2004. During the same period, the percentage of inmates with

<sup>2</sup> These totals count only one entry per inmate per year. For inmates that entered more than once during a calendar year, the data collected at first entry are used in the computation of values reported in this brief.

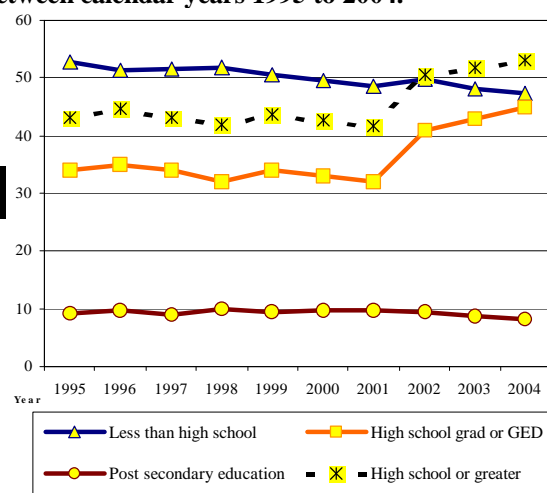
<sup>3</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File. Also note that the Census Bureau includes individuals that earn a high school equivalency certificate in the count of individuals with a high school diploma.

education beyond high school has remained consistent at about 9% of new inmates.

The percentage of inmates that claimed completion of 12<sup>th</sup> grade was approximately 34% from 1995 to 2001. In the years after 2001, this percentage has dropped to about 26%. The change coincides with efforts to better track the education of incoming inmates by recording whether the inmate has attained a GED.

The data show a marked increase in the percentage of entering inmates that claim a GED since introduction of the policy and a steady decrease in offenders that claim completion of 12 grades. Combined, more than half of incoming inmates in 2004 had at least a high school education. Figure 1 shows the trend in claimed education for inmates at entry between 1995 and 2004.

**Figure 1: Percent of inmates reporting some high school or less, high school graduation or GED, post secondary and greater than high school education between calendar years 1995 to 2004.**



## EDUCATIONAL TESTING

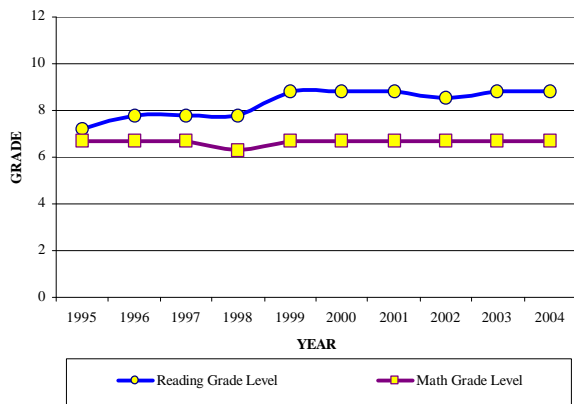
Individuals that enter prison are given a standardized test, the Wide-Range Achievement Test (WRAT). Results of the test provide a functional grade level for the inmate on reading, math and spelling tasks. Officials within DOP use these scores to determine which educational, vocational and life skill programs might be most appropriate for the individual inmate.

The NCDOP has a mandatory education policy designed to enhance basic literacy skills and to improve the prospects for individuals to become law-abiding and self-supporting upon release from prison.<sup>4</sup> Offenders that enter prison without a high school diploma or GED and who score below 6th grade level on either the reading or math sections of the test meet the criteria for the mandatory education program.

The mandatory education program includes adult basic education and general education development components. DOP also employs teachers at each of the five facilities serving youth offenders to assist inmates in preparation for GED testing.

During calendar year 2004, 32% of adults entering North Carolina's prisons met the criteria for this mandatory education program. This figure includes only those 23,234 individuals who completed both the reading and math sections of the WRAT and who provided information on their attainment of a high school diploma or equivalency certificate.

**Figure 2: Reading and math scores of the typical inmate at prison entry in North Carolina 1995-2004.**



The reading score for the typical inmate entering prison in 2004 was nearly 9<sup>th</sup> grade (8.8). Over time, scores on the reading portion of the test have increased from a low of approximately 7<sup>th</sup> grade in 1995 to the current 9<sup>th</sup> grade level.

<sup>4</sup> State of North Carolina. (2001). "Mandatory Education". Department of Correction Division of Prisons Policy and Procedures Manual.

The math score was lower than the reading score in 2004, nearly 7<sup>th</sup> grade (6.7). Math scores have remained stable during the past 10 years. Figure 2 shows the scores of the typical inmate entering DOP custody for years 1995-2004.

Offenders entering prison in North Carolina during 2004 consistently scored lower than their reported education level. The typical inmate who claimed a GED or high school diploma scored below 12<sup>th</sup> grade level on the reading and mathematics portion of the WRAT. Table 2 shows the typical WRAT score on reading and mathematics for categories of claimed academic achievement.

**Table 2: Median WRAT scores for reading and mathematics by claimed achievement level**

Highest Grade Claimed	WRAT SECTION	
	Math	Reading
Elementary (Grades 0-8)	5.3	5.5
High School (Grades 9-12)	5.7	6.8
GED	7.2	10.8
High School Grad	6.9	10.2
Post Secondary	8.5	12.5

**COMPARING SCORES OF NEW ADMISSIONS**

During calendar year 2004, reading and math scores of the typical inmate entering NCDOP were not different for inmates committed for felonies compared to inmates committed for misdemeanors. The typical female inmate scored at a higher achievement level on the reading portion of the WRAT than did the typical male inmate (10.5 and 8.5, respectively), but inmates of either sex scored at the same grade level (6.7) on the math portion of the test.

**OFFENDER AGE AND YOUTHFUL INMATES**

Test scores also varied by the age of the inmate. Academic achievement scores for individuals 25 to 34 years of age were highest when considering inmate age. The cohort of inmates who were 18 years of age or younger at entry scored at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade on both portions of the test. Table 3 shows WRAT scores by inmate age.

If you need additional information please contact David Edwards with the NCDOC Office of Research and Planning at 919-716-3080.

**Table 3: Median WRAT scores by age of inmates entering prison in 2004.**

Age	WRAT SECTION	
	Math	Reading
18 or younger	5.5	6.1
19-24	6.5	7.8
25-34	6.7	10.2
35-44	6.1	8.8
Over 44	6.1	7.8

During calendar year 2004, NC DOP admitted 356 individuals aged 18 or younger. The typical youthful inmate reported 9 years of education upon entry. Less than 1% of youthful inmates claimed a high school diploma (1 inmate); nearly 3% (10 inmates) claimed a GED.

**RACE/ETHNICITY**

Achievement scores varied by the racial identification of inmates. The typical Caucasian inmate scored highest on the reading portion of the WRAT. The typical Asian inmate had the highest score for math. Table 4 shows WRAT scores by the race of the inmate.

**Table 4: Median WRAT scores by race of inmates entering prison in 2004.**

Race	WRAT SECTION	
	Math	Reading
Asian	8.5	9.4
Black/African-American	6.1	7.8
Caucasian	7.2	10.2
Native American	5.9	7.2
Other Race	5.9	7.5