

# Incarcerated Women in Adult Foundational Education: A PIAAC Fact Sheet

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*“The importance of gender in [incarcerated adults returning to class] is particularly relevant given the opportunities for advancement afforded by educational completion.” (Abeling-Judge, 2020, p. 384)*

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This factsheet identifies key background characteristics of women in state and federal prisons who did not complete high school by their participation in adult foundational education (AFE) while incarcerated. It also explains their assessed skill levels in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. Factsheet data came from the [U.S. Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies \(PIAAC\) Prison Survey \(2014\)](#), and were collected when GED® testing was a primary high school equivalence option.

## Which incarcerated women is AFE serving?

### Serving women with life

**experience:** The median age of incarcerated women without diplomas overall is 35 to 39 years. Of incarcerated women participating in classes or tutoring for GED preparation (“in AFE”), 51% are age 40 or older, compared with 33% age 40 or older among those *not* participating.



**Serving women with health needs:** The median health of incarcerated women without diplomas overall is good. Of incarcerated women participating in AFE, 38% reported fair or poor health, similar to 41% of those *not* participating.



**Serving women with disabilities:** The overall rate of reported permanent disabilities among incarcerated women without diplomas is 13%, and of learning disabilities (LD) 38%. The rate of permanent disability among incarcerated women participating in AFE is 12%. The LD rate among participating incarcerated women is 36%.

**Serving women of color:** Higher percentages of Hispanic and Black women participate in AFE: Hispanic, 22%; Black, 31%; White 40%; other, 7%. The corresponding ethnic rates for those *not* participating are: Hispanic, 14%; Black, 25%; White 52%; other, 9%.

**Serving women who left high school early:** 96% of incarcerated women without diplomas overall started high school but did not complete it. Also, 22% of incarcerated women participating in AFE have parents who did not complete high school either. This rate is a higher rate than for the 10% of incarcerated women *not* participating.

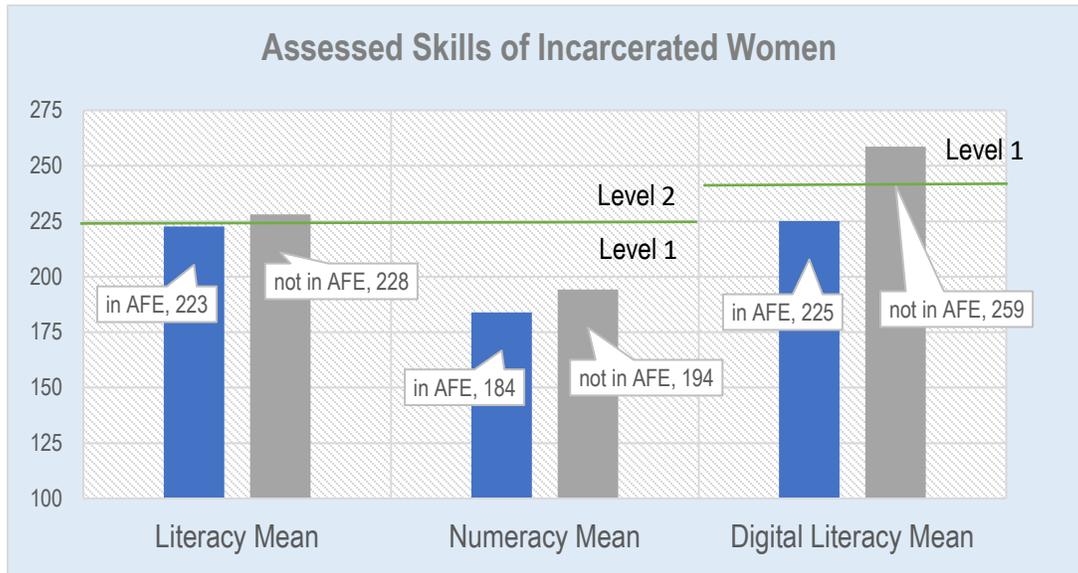
### Serving women with prior

**incarceration:** Of incarcerated women participating in AFE, 73% indicated they were incarcerated previously. Of those *not* participating in AFE, 78% had a prior incarceration.



**Serving women who will be released soon:** Two-thirds of incarcerated women participating in AFE expect to be released in the next two years: 31% expect release within 6 months, 14% within a year, and 21% within one to two years. This rate of women in AFE expecting release within two years is lower than that for nonparticipating women (81%). -----

## What assessed skill levels do incarcerated women in AFE have?



Incarcerated women in AFE have lower average assessed skills in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy than do women who are *not* participating (see graphic). Those in AFE tend to score at Level 1 in literacy and numeracy, and below Level 1 in digital literacy. These levels include tasks like reading a short text to find a single piece of information, understanding a simple percent such as 50%, and solving a problem using a single technology function with minimal steps. Incarcerated women not in AFE have higher score means, at Level 2 for literacy and at Level 1 for numeracy and digital literacy. The strongest mean difference in skills is in digital literacy. Women in AFE have significantly lower average scores in digital literacy. The National Center for Education Statistics [PIAAC website](#) offers further interpretation of what adults can do at individual skill levels in each domain.

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**Reference:** Abeling-Judge, D. (2020). Age matters: Stopping out, going back, and criminal desistance based on timing of educational return. *Crime & Delinquency*, 66(3), 363-391.

