



literacy & essential skills

fact sheet

Justice

Without literacy there can be no justice.

Higher literacy skills correspond directly to lower offending rates. Offenders experience literacy problems at a rate three times that of the general population and are four times as likely to have learning disabilities. Literacy problems are among the factors that contribute to incarceration.

Literacy is crucial in ensuring equal access to justice. The legal process, from arrest to sentencing, can be complex and alienating for those with low literacy. Literacy skills are crucial in order to engage with the legal system and ensure access to equal opportunities in the pursuit of justice. Low literacy presents a severe disadvantage to those engaged with any level of legal process making it difficult to understand relevant materials or adequately represent themselves in official proceedings.

Literacy training and adult basic education in prisons reduces recidivism. Low literacy is a risk factor for recidivism. Studies show that prisoners who participate in prison-based education are less likely to reoffend. This provides social and economic returns that far outweigh the original investments.

Every dollar allocated to vocational and basic education programs for offenders yields a 200-300% return on investment. Prison literacy and education programs provide prisoners with a second chance at an honest, healthy and productive life.

Investing in literacy is an effective crime prevention strategy. Early prevention strategies that include literacy can help reduce risk factors such as poverty, unemployment, and isolation that lead to crime.

What can be done?

- Support and fund prison-based education programs.
- Develop partnerships among justice advocates, legal professionals, literacy organizations, and government departments to research literacy levels and needs, and to respond by creating appropriate initiatives.
- Ensure that families and youth 'at risk' have access to literacy programs and remedial schooling.
- Provide consistent and accessible support to children, families and adults who have learning disabilities.
- Promote clear language in the legal process to ensure fair and effective functioning of the courts.
- Provide assessment and referral to literacy programs for all inmates, especially those with short prison sentences. Ensure that follow-up and support are available so that they can continue literacy training.