

# No Man Left Behind: The Correlation Between Literacy Rates and Incarceration

Amanitore Truitt  
Durham Academy Upper School

## Introduction

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Education and Correctional Populations," "High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than High school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime." Education is the backbone of our society, however, students are increasingly suffering from low literacy, a significant portion of the population lacks basic reading and writing skills, is affected by low socioeconomic statuses, and the achievement gap is widening. There are very few sources contrasting urban areas with rural areas within North Carolina facing this phenomenon. It is imperative to our community and future that Americans explore the problem as well as the solution.

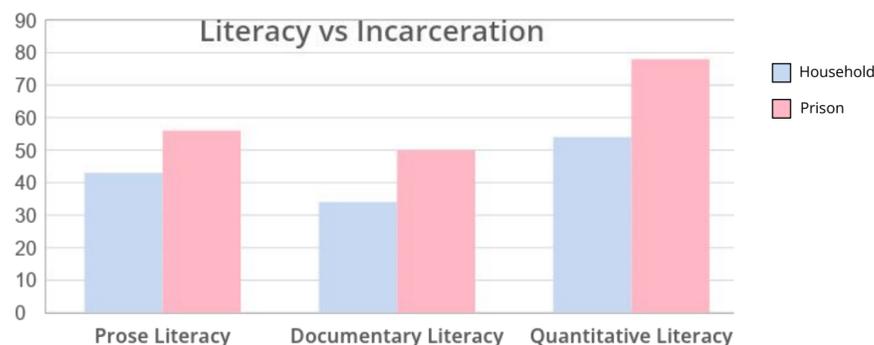
**Research Question:** "What is the impact of educational disparities on marginalized people in North Carolina's urban and rural areas?"

**Thesis statement:** Educational disparities on marginalized people in North Carolina's urban and rural areas are affecting student's abilities to receive a quality education as well as avoid incarceration.

**Methodology:** "No Man Left Behind: The Correlation Between Literacy Rates and Incarceration," is a research project on why the systems created for education, social inequalities, and judicial systems do not benefit marginalized students and how that leads to incarceration. To obtain accurate information, this project contains secondary sources from The Bureau of Justice Statistics for clear numerical data to The Association of Public & Land Grants for precise data on salaries. "No Man Left Behind" contains both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that all the information included is both specific and valid. This project also includes surveys from notable sources such as The Department of Justice, which share firsthand experiences of inmates' lives before being incarcerated.

## Background

Dropout and incarceration rates are constantly increasing due to several reasons, prominently familial inequity and underprivileged schools. According to Habitat for Humanity, "Children from the 90th percentile of family income earners consistently perform an equivalent of four grade levels higher than children from the 10th percentile" (Sean Reardon, 2019). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are performing at a higher rate due to more resources and parental support. The difficulty students face in school can and will affect their future. Without a high school diploma, students risk having a lower-paying job. A major effect of low socioeconomic status and poor literacy rates is that they increase the probability of incarceration. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, "Two-thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare" (Brandon Cardet-Hernandez 2024). The connection is apparent, students who aren't meeting standards face challenges later in life, and in some cases, incarceration. The problem lies within the education system, social inequities, and the judicial system that our country has built upon.



This bar graph represents the percentage of people who are below basic or at a basic Literacy level understanding. The blue bar data represents the literacy of inmates in the year 2003. The blue bars represent Household data, while the pink bars represent the Prison data. Prose Literacy represents comprehending longer text, Documentary Literacy is using non-continuous text in diff. formats. Quantitative is comprehending computer age information,

## Data Analysis

A school's resources will allow students to flourish or hinder their education. "Reallocated Resources: How to Boost Student Achievement Without Asking?" found that resources create an engaging and motivating environment (Allen Odden et. Al.).

In addition to the student's school life, home life plays a crucial role in the student's academic achievement. "Developments in the Science of Learning" states a school's resources can determine a student's academic achievement. However, "If the student is living in a relatively substandard condition, negative health outcomes impact children's physical, behavioral, and cognitive development, contributing to increased school absences and poor academic performance." (How does Housing Affect Children's Education?) All of which relates to why student's achievement depends on their home and school life.

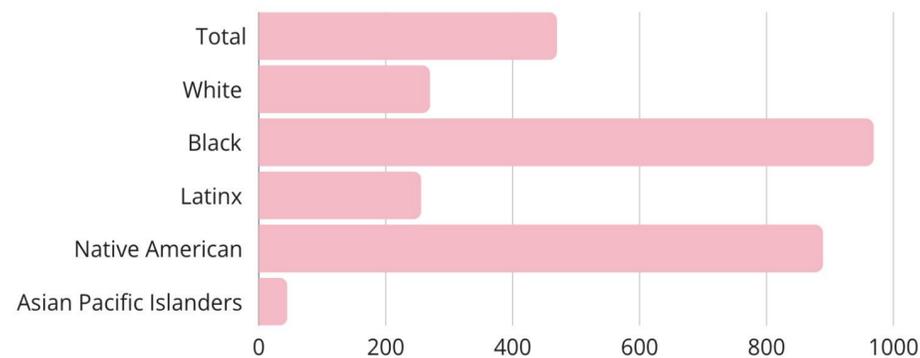
According to The Department of Justice, when inmates who left school were asked about why they dropped out, about one-third reported they lost interest or experienced academic difficulty. This indicates the decision to drop out is influenced by more than just the act itself. It often begins with challenges and disengagement within the school's system (DOJ OIG Releases Report on Issues Surrounding Inmate Deaths in Federal Bureau of Prisons Institution, 2004).

The Association of Public & Land Grants states "Typical earnings for bachelor's degree holders are \$40,500 or 86 percent higher than those whose highest degree is a high school diploma" (Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz, 2019). In short, High School Dropouts will not receive remunerative jobs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states food, water, and sleep are all necessary for survival. In an article entitled "Social Class and Crime," "People from lower social classes, who often face economic hardships, limited access to education, and fewer opportunities for legitimate means of income, may be more likely to engage in criminal behavior as a means of survival or to achieve their material goals" (Raymond J. Michalowski, 2009). The probability of someone of lower socioeconomic status committing a crime is high.

According to Tufts in an article entitled "How Racial Segregation and Policing Intersect in America," "predominantly Black neighborhoods are simultaneously over-policed when it comes to surveillance and social control and under-policed when it comes to emergency services" (Robin Smyton, 2020). Police are targeting certain communities with an overwhelming population of High School dropouts.

Prison Incarceration rates in North Carolina, by race



This graph represents the prison incarceration rates for different races. African Americans are the main group affected by mass incarceration. This graph is measured in 100,000s of people.

## Results

The research conveyed that the correlation between literacy rates and incarceration is closely affected by low socioeconomic factors. Familial disparities affect a student's ability to get a sufficient education. Without familial support students tend to struggle more in school, students in lower socioeconomic communities also have the same effect. Schools in lower socioeconomic communities have fewer resources. Habitat for Humanity states "Children from families in the highest quartile of household incomes are more than twice as likely to enroll and graduate from college than children from households with lower incomes." The difference between underprivileged students and privileged Students is astronomical. With all students having equal and equitable resources, each student would be able to achieve unimaginable heights.

The research also shares the process of being a High School Dropout can be stopped before it even begins. Students having teachers who support them, and parents who contribute to their education makes all of the difference. Data supports the idea of inmates facing educational difficulty before their dropout, by changing the curriculum and support given to students, the education crisis will change with it.

The reason why dropouts are being arrested is simple. Without an adequate living wage, people are having to resort to crime for their survival. Unfortunately, people who don't have a GED or a high school diploma will not have the means necessary to live. In any case, crime and theft is a quick way to receive money to carry out daily life.

The problem with people committing crimes, despite the morality issue, is the police presence in the places where crimes are appearing. When looking for an issue, one will find it. Crime is most prominent in Urban, Black, and Brown communities but also in lower socioeconomic communities, all of which also have a large police presence. With crime and police in the same place, mass incarceration is imminent.

There is a connection between literacy rates, and incarceration, as well as the systems that support it. It is imperative not only in North Carolina but the entirety of the US to understand the importance of the connection. To find a solution, one must research the problem. A solution to this problem would be breaking apart the systems that create a cycle of poverty and inadequate education. More specifically, rebuilding the education system from the ground up to care about the children and their learning. Without our community caring about every child in and out of school we will solve this.

## Conclusion

The system in which we live is creating and contributing to the education and incarceration crisis. Low socioeconomic problems perpetuate the achievement gap in the pipeline to incarceration because of the lack of opportunities and resources. Students who live in impoverished communities go to schools with a lack of resources due to poor funding. These schools create a damper on their potential and the probability for a student to drop out becomes higher. The same systems that create unreasonable standards to obtain a job, create racial and social justice disparities within the same communities. Incarceration will continue to be a problem because of the way the poverty cycle is set up. It is up to the future generation to fix the problems of the past. If this cycle continues, the wealth inequality gap will increase, mass incarceration will increase, and our future leaders of the country will be at a disadvantage.

# Bibliography

- A, Gordon Rouse Kimberly. *BEYOND MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS: What Do People Strive for? - ProQuest*.  
[www.proquest.com/openview/88a69d3ef8e46d1bdd3cd0156aaff53/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=41476](http://www.proquest.com/openview/88a69d3ef8e46d1bdd3cd0156aaff53/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=41476).
- “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2019 – Statistical Tables | Bureau of Justice Statistics.” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*,  
[bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/correctional-populations-united-states-2019-statistical-tables](http://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/correctional-populations-united-states-2019-statistical-tables).
- Demographics – Poverty in North Carolina*. [cghudsongis515.wordpress.ncsu.edu/demographics](http://cghudsongis515.wordpress.ncsu.edu/demographics).
- “How Does Housing Affect Children’s Education?” *GMHFH*,  
[www.greatermatthewshabitat.org/education#:~:text=%5D,health%2C%20and%20improved%20academic%20achievement](http://www.greatermatthewshabitat.org/education#:~:text=%5D,health%2C%20and%20improved%20academic%20achievement).
- “How People Learn.” *Google Books*,  
[books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QZb7PnTgSCgC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=does+having+more+learning+resources+help+you+learn+better&ots=FvJOMGfqSD&sig=eetNSWhUxsRy9v\\_AKuY82RWTZWM#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QZb7PnTgSCgC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=does+having+more+learning+resources+help+you+learn+better&ots=FvJOMGfqSD&sig=eetNSWhUxsRy9v_AKuY82RWTZWM#v=onepage&q&f=false).
- Initiative, Prison Policy. “People in Prison Are Disproportionately Illiterate.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, [www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/literacy\\_2003.html](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/literacy_2003.html).
- Jv. “The Relationship Between Incarceration and Low Literacy — Literacy Mid-South.” *Literacy Mid-South*, 6 July 2022,  
[www.literacymidsouth.org/news/the-relationship-between-incarceration-and-low-literacy#:~:text=Early%20Signs%20in%20Adults,%2C%20dropout%20rates%2C%20and%20crime](http://www.literacymidsouth.org/news/the-relationship-between-incarceration-and-low-literacy#:~:text=Early%20Signs%20in%20Adults,%2C%20dropout%20rates%2C%20and%20crime).
- Ramirez-Thompson, Eric, PhD. “Social Class and Crime.” *Pressbooks*, 31 Aug. 2023,  
[cod.pressbooks.pub/criminology/chapter/social-class-and-crime/#:~:text=People%20from%20lower%20social%20classes,to%20achieve%20their%20material%20goal](http://cod.pressbooks.pub/criminology/chapter/social-class-and-crime/#:~:text=People%20from%20lower%20social%20classes,to%20achieve%20their%20material%20goal).
- Hanushek, Eric A., et al. “The Achievement Gap Fails to Close.” *Education Next*, 18 Jan. 2022,  
[www.educationnext.org/achievement-gap-fails-close-half-century-testing-shows-persistent-divide](http://www.educationnext.org/achievement-gap-fails-close-half-century-testing-shows-persistent-divide).
- Arsenio, William F. “The Psychological and Educational Costs of Growing Income Inequality.” *Human Development*, vol. 56, no. 2, Jan. 2013, pp. 134–40.  
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000345773>.
- Costelloe, Michael T., and Raymond J. Michalowski. “Social Class and Crime.” *21st Century Criminology: A Reference Handbook*, edited by J. Mitchell Miller, vol. 1, SAGE Reference, 2009, pp. 153-161. 21st Century Reference Series. *Gale eBooks*,  
[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3201600029/GVRL?u=cod\\_lrc&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=66606965](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3201600029/GVRL?u=cod_lrc&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=66606965). Accessed 24 July 2024.
- “Reallocating Resources.” *Google Books*,  
[books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QkZmgMvKoRcC&oi=fnd&pg=PP9&dq=does+having+resources+help+students&ots=BGQMo-m8Wv&sig=3RCRPRQxOF5ReIGWJDuaHe0R15k#v=onepage&q=does%20having%20resources%20help%20students&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=QkZmgMvKoRcC&oi=fnd&pg=PP9&dq=does+having+resources+help+students&ots=BGQMo-m8Wv&sig=3RCRPRQxOF5ReIGWJDuaHe0R15k#v=onepage&q=does%20having%20resources%20help%20students&f=false).
- DOJ OIG Releases Report on Issues Surrounding Inmate Deaths in Federal Bureau of Prisons Institutions*. 15 Feb. 2024,  
[oig.justice.gov/news/doj-oig-releases-report-issues-surrounding-inmate-deaths-federal-bureau-prisons-institutions](http://oig.justice.gov/news/doj-oig-releases-report-issues-surrounding-inmate-deaths-federal-bureau-prisons-institutions).