In this issue of Narrowing The Gap, we focus on one of the groups adversely affected by inequality: Individuals With Less Than A High School Diploma. Other issues will describe inequalities faced by children, immigrants, individuals currently in jail or on probation, individuals living in poverty, individuals with a physical or intellectual disability, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer, racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities, seniors, single parents, and women.
Relationship between High School Graduation Rates and Crime Reduction

In 2008 Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization, released “School or the Streets: Crime and America’s Dropout Crisis.” The report quantified what increasing the high school graduation rate might mean for crime reduction in the U.S. It found that a 10% increase in high school graduation rates would lead to a 9% decrease in rates of criminal arrest and reduce murder and assault rates by 20%. In this way, the report estimated that more than 3,000 murders and almost 175,000 aggravated assaults could be prevented merely by increasing education.

The Equality Indicators has recently conducted its own research on this topic, finding a relationship between high school graduation rates and crime levels. We looked at 20 years of data on both these topics and found a negative correlation between education and crime: higher rates of high school graduation were associated with lower crime rates.

Fight Crime’s report noted that high-quality pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) has been shown to be one of the most important tools in increasing high school graduation rates. Consequently, greater investment in early education programs that better prepare students for success in high school and beyond has been touted as an important policy tool for crime reduction. Cities like New York have implemented universal Pre-K programs in an effort to improve high school graduation rates and other outcomes.

Efforts to increase education seem to be working. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 86% of students enrolled in public high school in 2013-14 graduated compared to 72% in 2010-11. Iowa boasts the highest rate, 91%, while New Mexico has the lowest, 69%; New York’s graduation rate is 77%.

Educational Attainment and Criminal Justice Involvement: 68% Of Inmates Lack High School Diploma

More than two thirds (68%) of state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Low educational attainment, especially among African-American and Hispanic men, has been cited as one of the contributing factors to mass incarceration.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences compared rates of male incarceration between 1980 and 2000 by education level as well as by race. Their findings are eye opening. While rates among the college educated stayed relatively steady, rates for those without a high school diploma skyrocketed, especially among African-American men. In 1980 10% of African American men without a high school diploma were in prison or jail. By 2008, the rate had jumped to 37%.

Many point to schools themselves as feeders for prisons and jails, especially for African-American and Latino men. The Public Broadcasting Service found these students face disproportionately high rates of being expelled (40% of those expelled) and being involved in “in-school” arrests (70%). Black and Latino students are 2x as likely as white students not to graduate.

Education as a Focal Point for Re-Entry Strategies: A Bright Spot in the Criminal Justice Reform Movement

In 2015 the Obama administration allowed Pell grants for education to be used to fund prison college programs. The move emphasized education in prison as one effective way to curb recidivism.

NPR interviewed Lois Davis, Senior Policy Researcher at RAND Corporation, on the efficacy of these programs. Based on their meta-analysis, she reported the following: “If an individual participates in any type of correctional education program—whether it be adult basic ed, GED preparation, college education, or vocational education—they had a 13% point reduction in their risk of being re-incarcerated.”

RAND’s analysis included savings to taxpayers on education programs versus the cost of incarceration, and found a $4 to $5 savings for each taxpayer. Cost-benefit analyses like these are important, as funding remains the number one issue for these programs. As Davis noted, “Some states provide state funds for college programs or maybe by individual donations or foundations. But currently, for the most part, it's up to the inmate and their families to pay for these programs.”

There is growing evidence these programs work. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers 10% of its GED testing programs in correctional facilities, looked at GED pass rates for the incarcerated versus the general population. In 2010, ETS reported that 75,000 inmates took the GED. Pass rates for the incarcerated actually exceeded those of the general population, 75% vs. 73%, although the difference was small.

The Equality Indicators is a project of the Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) of the City University of New York. The project measures progress towards greater equality across six themes related to Economy, Education, Health, Housing, Justice, and Services using 96 indicators. Each indicator is scored from 1 to 100, where 1 represents the most inequality and 100 the least inequality. For more information please visit our website at equalityindicators.org and follow us on twitter @equalityISLG.