

Illiteracy

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About 15% of adults in Oregon prisons read below an eighth-grade level, an analysis by the Statesman Journal found. Nationwide, an estimated 70% or more of incarcerated people can't read at the fourth-grade level.

It's not clear whether Oregon prisoners are actually more literate since there is no state-by-state comparative data or federal oversight. Corrections officials could not explain why the Oregon numbers are so different than national surveys.

State law requires the majority of these prisoners take classes while incarcerated. Yet the Statesman found nearly half of Oregon inmates who qualify as low-level readers — those who read below an eighth-grade level — have never been enrolled. And funding and access to these programs are not prioritized.

Funding for adult education in Oregon prisons accounts for less than 6% of the Department of Correction's overall budget. No money is allocated specifically for lower-level readers.

Oregon prioritizes classroom spots for incarcerated youth with prior special education history, as well as adults with fewer than three years remaining on their sentences and those who have waited the longest.

Between February 2021 and January 2022, Oregon prisoners placed in classes had been on the waitlist for an average of 68 days. The longest delay was 266 days.

More than 1,200 prisoners remained on the waitlist as of late June.

Prison education advocates are pushing for change at the Legislature. They want more class options, for example, as well as easier access to higher education in and after prison.

There has been little public discussion, however, about how to better serve prisoners who need basic reading and writing skills.

And while the corrections department works with organizations to support parolees upon release with things such as housing and employment, they have no community partnerships to continue parolees' literacy education — despite studies that show specifically helping the low-reader population could have a significant impact on the broader community.

Those who complete educational programs while in prison are less likely to return and are less likely to engage in violence during incarceration. U.S. De-

partment of Justice studies also show the positive impact these programs have when formerly incarcerated individuals return to society, including a higher chance of being gainfully employed.

"A lot of these folks have been in the criminal justice system since they were young children," criminal justice reform advocate Julianne Jackson of Salem said. "So, those cute little folks that we should have taught to read before? They're adults now. And they still deserve that opportunity. They still deserve the opportunity to do better."

Illiteracy in Oregon prisons

Jeffrey Williams said he ran away from home at 13, never having really gone to school. He could barely read or write when he first entered prison in the 1980s.

Williams spent five years in juvenile detention, he said, before entering the adult system as a self-described "notorious gang member." Now 55, he's been in and out for three decades with the longest span outside lasting about five years.

In a class at Oregon State Correctional Institution in May, Williams eagerly read the day's assignment aloud, offering to continue further before popcorning to the next student.

"I get frustrated sometimes and want to walk out, but I don't," he said. "I know it's helping me."

Williams is scheduled for release in less than a year, with plans to manage some property, and maybe mentor at-risk youth one day, he said. He wiped tears from under his glasses before lifting his shirt to display his latest tattoo — the name of a grandchild across his stomach.

"I don't have time for prison anymore," he said. "I have grandkids I haven't held yet."

Prisoners undergo several assessments during the intake process, explained Tracie Hightower, director of education and training for the Oregon Department of Corrections.

These assessments — typically conducted with paper and pencil in the first three days — identify their educational needs and whether they qualify for the state's Adult Basic Skills Development programming.

Adults who score less than 235 on the reading portion of a test called the "Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems," known as CASAS, are assigned mandatory literacy courses. A score of 235 is equivalent to an eighth-grade reading level.

Reliable data on how many adults in

prison can read proficiently is hard to discern.

Some complete the test in earnest. Some "pencil whip" it, corrections officials said, randomizing answers to get through quickly. A handful of former inmates told the Statesman Journal they were advised by other prisoners to purposely perform poorly on assessments so they could qualify for more support.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show 10% of all Oregon adults 15 years and older are considered illiterate because they lack basic prose literacy skills or could not be tested due to language barriers.

According to CASAS test results, as of mid-June, about 15% of adults in Oregon's prisons read below the eighth-grade level.

The Statesman Journal found that of the Oregon prisoners who tested below the eighth-grade level, 8.6% are Black. That aligns with the 8.7% of Black adults in custody overall.

But nearly 33% of the adults who qualify for mandatory literacy education are identified as Hispanic, compared with 12.7% of Hispanic adults in the state prison population.

Oregon is one of few states that confirms if adults in custody have earned a GED, high school diploma or equivalent. Department of Corrections officials said more than 60% of inmates have a credential, which they say is the inverse of what they've seen from other states.

After receiving the CASAS scores, inmates are assigned to a class. Being assigned does not mean they're enrolled — they could be put on a waitlist first.

The only adults who are exempt from classes are those with developmental disabilities, those who have security or health reasons, or those sentenced to less than a year, to death or life without parole.

If an adult refuses to participate, corrections officials said their privileges are downgraded, such as yard time or what they can buy from the prison's canteen.

Each facility decides how they structure classes. Many do two hours of classroom time, two hours of one-on-one tutoring and two hours in the computer lab per student per week.

The Department of Corrections partners with Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission and contracts with local community colleges to provide the instructors.

For low-level readers, Hightower said, instructors are looking for skills like phonic awareness, decoding, reading fluency, comprehension and vocabulary building — things skilled readers use constantly.

Lessons also are based on the student's interests, culture and real-life context. There is a focus on daily living skills needed to function both in and outside prison, Hightower explained, including how to navigate DOC documents, medical and dental forms or job applications.

"Many adults have been in DOC custody for so many years that they have no understanding or experience with what an email is, how to send and receive a text message," she said.

State policy requires students in custody to be retested after receiving between 60 and 100 hours of instruction to measure progress.

The Statesman Journal asked to see data showing how those serving longer sentences progressed in their reading levels. Corrections officials said there was no research on the subject.

"Testing at the beginning of COVID was nonexistent. Then it was completed one at a time, which makes for a slow process since," Hightower said.

She added the information they have now, as a result, doesn't fully represent the last two years.

Each state sets a different bar for how they define and address illiteracy. And there is little to no federal oversight. Data on literacy rates are often outdated or incomplete.

California, for example, requires its prisoners to be assessed upon entry, like Oregon. Prisoners there attend academic programming two hours a day, five days a week. Of all incarcerated people in California, 8.3% scored below a fourth-grade reading level based on CASAS. The fourth-grade level is used by California corrections to determine class placement, compared to Oregon's eighth-grade level.

In Washington, 56% of tested prisoners scored below the eighth-grade reading level. But unlike Oregon, Washington only tests incarcerated adults after it's confirmed they don't have a high school diploma or equivalent.

Washington retests prisoners every three to four months to measure progress. Corrections officials said testing and classes have both decreased during COVID-19.

Some comparative data is available through the National Reporting System for Adult Education, tracking Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, or Title II, programs.

Oregon's Title II programs, for example, served more than 2,200 currently and formerly incarcerated adults who received basic skills and literacy services from July 2020 through June 2021.

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Center

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The center also provides community members the ability to borrow durable medical equipment such as wheelchairs, walkers and other mobility aids.

Bates said she was new at the center when it had to close down because of the wildfires, and then again during the worst of the pandemic.

"As we opened back up, I've been trying to expand what we do in the community center," she said. "When people walked into the building, it seemed like they only saw a craft store; there wasn't a distinction between it and the community center."

One of the craft store's providers, Kimberly Shaw, owns a Teacup Greeting Cards business that dominates a display bank just inside the doors of the center. It shares the small building's space alongside handmade children's clothes, bird houses, jewelry and all manner of original artisan arts and crafts.

Shaw comes from a family farming background in the Orange County area of Southern California, and has been making cards since 1984. She moved to the Mt. Angel area in 2012, but only brought her stock of greeting cards — now her primary business — into the community/senior center in November of last year.

Putting her cards in the center was a positive move for Shaw, in that "it allowed me to do something different and completely outside the box." She said she now has a chance to create cards that feature words of encouragement.



The sign outside identifies the wares sold at the Mt. Angel Community and Senior Center. GEOFF PARKS / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Sales of her products and the other craftspeople's diverse stock provide a nice stream of revenue — and also to the center — most contracts provide the Mt. Angel Community and Senior Center a 35% revenue cut of the sales.

Over a century has passed since the first "Community Chest" was founded in Cleveland, Ohio, by a charitable foundation. And though the term has faded in usage, the principles behind it are thriving in places like Mt. Angel.

Freelance writer/photographer Geoff Parks is based in Salem. Have a Silverton story idea? E-mail him at geoffparks@gmail.com.

Budget

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The city is installing a new pump station and water line at a cost of \$4.6 million. Part of that will be paid for with a \$1.1 million grant.

The water line project on Second Street will upsize 41,400 feet of water from Jefferson Street to Lincoln Street. The city received a \$1.15 million grant from the Economic Development Administration for that. It also will contribute \$200,000 to the project.

Also, 1,400 feet of Second Street from Lincoln will receive sidewalk and stormwater improvements at a cost of \$2.4 million.

The city also has projects including a study on storage and recovery of water (\$450,000), replacement of sewer pipelines (\$450,000), improvements to the wastewater treatment plant (\$245,000), a sidewalk on James Street (\$307,500) and stormwater improvements from Rock Street to Jersey Street (\$100,000). Silverton has a beginning fund balance of \$55 million.

The city is receiving \$1.1 million in its second installation of funds from the American Rescue Plan and \$250,000 from Marion County for a pallet sheltering facility.

The fiscal year started July 1 and runs through June 30, 2023.

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Inspection

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"While ODA takes the backlog very seriously and is working to decrease the numbers, the backlog does not directly pose a health risk to the public but represents a decrease in regulatory oversight," ODA communications director Andrea Cantu-Schomus said.

Ensuring safe food

ODA's Food Safety Program licenses and inspects nearly 11,000 food-related establishments, including grocery stores, egg handlers, dairies, bakeries, shellfish and seafood handlers, food storage warehouses, locker plants, meat, dairy and beverage processors, and licensed domestic kitchens.

Its mission is to prevent foodborne illness by checking whether those establishments are following rules to assure consumers' safety, such as keeping deli food at correct temperatures, keeping expired food off shelves, making sure employees wash their hands, and protecting products from pests such as rats and cockroaches.

The program doesn't inspect restaurants or school cafeterias. Those are overseen by the Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Education, which delegate the job to county health departments.

The Statesman Journal first exposed problems in the Food Safety Program in a December 2014 report on the state's failure to regularly inspect grocery stores.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends grocery stores be inspected at least every six months. But the Statesman Journal found that 55 percent of Oregon's retail food establishments had not had an inspection for a year, and 5 percent had not had an inspection for three years or more.

In 2014, when the Statesman Journal requested inspection reports for the 29 largest stores in Salem and Keizer, more than half had not had an inspection in more than a year. Six had gone more than two years without an inspection and one had not been inspected in three years.

During a four-day period before providing the records, the state quickly inspected the seven local stores that were

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Appeal Tribune

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