Chapter 17

The Digital Divide among the Incarcerated Women in the United States:
A Case Study from New Jersey

Heather A. McKay
Rutgers University, USA

Patrice K. Morris
Rutgers University, USA

ABSTRACT

A computer-based learning (CBL) program in the New Jersey women's prison system is helping to bridge the digital divide among the incarcerated. The hallmark of this program is a computer-based learning process that begins in the prison environment and follows an inmate through the corrections system and into the community. The program provides access to computers through computer labs, use of computers in coursework, and computer ownership upon release into the community. Access to information technology helps to develop skills that will be useful for offender's chances of employment upon reentry and may even help to reduce recidivism rates.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) is prevalent in most workplaces and homes in the United States. According to Pew Research, about eighty percent of the population uses the Internet and about seventy percent of Americans have a computer in their home (Pew Research, 2007). While the use of technology in the United States is clearly high, there are groups that remain disconnected from these technologies. Since the mid 1990s the term "digital divide" has been used to describe disparities in access among citizens to technology and more recently gaps in technological literacy. Academics and policy-makers have explored and expanded on the concept of digital inequality, and the debate has led to the understanding that access to both available hardware and skills development are essential components in the effort to close the digital divide. While the two waves of digital divide research tend to examine the access and skill levels of marginal-

ized groups according to race, gender, income, and other variables, they have not yet flushed out the effects of this existing technological disparity on incarcerated populations. Some argue that computer education within the correctional system is as important for the incarcerated as it is for traditional students throughout America (Lintner et al., 2001). Individuals leaving prison will be competing for jobs in which knowledge of technology and computers is essential. By improving an inmate's computer skills, the system is providing that inmate with a significant boost that will help him/her re-integrate into the workforce.

This chapter will analyze the digital divide in the context of the correctional system through a case study in New Jersey designed to help incarcerated women develop computer skills and knowledge in preparation for successful community reintegration. This effort to close the digital divide among female offenders is critical to their future employment. Technological skills are necessary in today's high-tech labor market. It is estimated that by 2014, seventy-seven percent of jobs in the public and private sector will require good technological skills. A learning system in prison which better prepares women offenders for high tech jobs offers an important antidote to the digital divide they will face upon release.

INCARCERATION AND EDUCATION

In the United States today, there are approximately 2.3 million people incarcerated in state and federal prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Of those incarcerated in the United States, 115,779 are female offenders and 1 in 100 African American women are incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008; Pew Center on the States, 2008). During 2007, the prison population rose by more than 25,000 inmates (Pew Center on the States, 2008), and women are currently the fastest growing group of prisoners in the United States with their incarceration rates rising 1.2 percent in

2007 as compared to 0.7 percent for men (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Statistics show that 26,500 people are currently incarcerated in the state of New Jersey; about 1, 400 of whom are female (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008).

Although men and women share comparable experiences that lead them towards incarceration, the path to prison is influenced by gender (WRITE-NJ, 2006). Women's economic marginality, the high rates of violence towards women, and women's inferior position in informal economies as well as other factors are all distinctive their incarceration. Women's criminal offenses also differ from men's; women rarely commit violent crimes and are most often arrested for economic and drug crimes. Women also generally serve longer sentences than men for the same crimes, and are older at the time of their first incarceration. The average age of a female prisoner in the United States is 31 while men are generally imprisoned in their twenties (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006).

Getting Out and Staying Out: The Importance of Education for Reentry Women

While time served in prison continues to grow for women as well as men, most women leave prison eventually and return to their families and communities. Reentry into the community presents formidable challenges to these already economically and racially disadvantaged individuals (Travis & Visher, 2005; Western, 2006). As a result, policymakers, correctional officials, and academics are interested in how offenders spend their time while in correctional care. There is also great attention paid to how experiences in the correctional system impact the lives of offenders post-release (Austin, 2001; Travis & Visher, 2005; Vacca, 2004; Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002). The New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission (SETC) found that for people who are incarcerated, male or female:

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