Prison Component
of the
2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy

What is the prison component of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL)?

The NAAL prison component is a nationally representative survey and assessment of the English literacy skills of adult inmates in state and federal prisons in the United States. Results from the 2003 NAAL prison assessment will provide literacy performance estimates for the total adult prison population and for inmate groups of particular interest to policymakers. The assessment will compare results for the prison population with those of the general U.S. adult population—and report changes in performance since the 1992 forerunner assessment, the prison component of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS).

Why is a separate prison assessment needed?

The nation's prison population includes disproportionate percentages of adults with certain demographic and other characteristics associated with low levels of literacy. Compared to the general population, for example, prison inmates are disproportionately minority and poorly educated. In addition, results from the 1992 prison assessment indicated that the literacy skills of this population were substantially lower than those of the general household population. Results from the 2003 prison assessment, including new types of information about the literacy strengths and weaknesses of the least-literate participants, can help policymakers and corrections and education professionals to develop more effective literacy and other programs for prison inmates. A principal aim of such efforts would be to improve the ability of this population to function and achieve their goals in the general society—in the workplace, at home, and in the community—upon their release from prison.

What are the characteristics of the NAAL prison sample?

The NAAL prison sample from which data were collected (the reporting sample)

- is representative of the nation's prisoners as a whole, but not of prison populations in specific states;
- consists of 1,173 participants (unweighted) from 107 prisons, including 12 federal prisons, in 30 states;
- includes disproportionate percentages of male, minority, young, and poorly educated adults, compared with the general population; and
- is combined with the national household sample to improve representation of adults with the characteristics listed above—and can be separated from the combined sample to allow separate estimates of literacy for the prison population.

What are the components of the NAAL prison assessment?

All NAAL participants, including the prison sample, are administered the following:

Background questionnaire. The background questionnaire collects information about demographic and other characteristics, many of which are associated with the level of literacy (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, language, education, participation in welfare, job-related training, use of technology, health-related conditions and activities, and literacy practices). Unique to the prison population questionnaire is information on prison experiences, such as special programs and group activities, sentenced offenses, criminal histories, work assignments, library access, and education programs taken since incarceration.

Core screening questions. Seven core screening tasks are administered to determine whether respondents have sufficient literacy skills to complete the "main NAAL" assessment; those with very low performance on these tasks are administered a new component of NAAL called the Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment (ALSA), instead of the main NAAL.

Main NAAL assessment or *ALSA.* (1) The main NAAL assesses task-based literacy performance (i.e., how well participants perform everyday tasks such as balancing a checkbook or identifying needed information in a bus schedule). (2) ALSA measures basic, word-level literacy skills and, for the first time, provides much-needed information about the literacy skills and weaknesses of the least-literate adults. Oral directions and questions are provided in either English or Spanish and oral responses may be in either language, but the material respondents attempt to read is in English.

Fluency Addition to NAAL (FAN). FAN is a new component of NAAL that measures the oral reading fluency of *all* NAAL participants. FAN uses speech-recognition software to assess the ability of adults to decode and recognize words and to read aloud with fluency (words per minute and reading accuracy are recorded for analysis and scoring). Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish, but answers must be in English.

What results will be reported and when?

The expected release date for the prison assessment report is March 2006. *For participants who take the main NAAL*, results include average scale scores reflecting skills in three areas: prose, document, and quantitative literacy. Also reported will be a new health literacy score, reflecting how well respondents can apply literacy skills to read and understand common health-related materials, such as directions on a prescription medication label. *For participants who take ALSA*, average scores reflect the ability of the least-literate adults to identify letters, numbers, and words—and to comprehend simple prose and documents with the aid of familiar, tangible materials (e.g., packaged food products) and nonlinguistic clues (e.g., pictures and logos). *Results from FAN* include average scores for, among other measures, total words read aloud correctly and total words read aloud correctly per minute.