



Educational Programs Within Prison

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Abstract: This policy brief analyzes the role of education in juvenile correctional facilities, evaluates how educational access affects recidivism and reentry outcomes, and considers how these programs can support broader public safety goals.

Keywords — Rehabilitation, prison education program (PPE), incarceration, juvenile

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational programs within juvenile correctional facilities play a critical role in shaping rehabilitation, reentry outcomes, and public safety. Typically, many justice-involved youth experience significant educational disruption before and during incarceration. Therefore, access to consistent academic support, vocational training, and credit-bearing coursework can strongly improve their ability to reintegrate into school, employment, and community life after release. While many jurisdictions recognize education as a key part of rehabilitation, evidence suggests that these programs are often unevenly implemented and fail to fully address barriers such as interrupted schooling, limited individualized support, inconsistent credit transfer, and gaps between facility-based education and community schools.

II. OVERVIEW

As defined by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, a [prison education program](#) (PEP) is an eligible educational program offered by a federal, state, or local correctional institution to incarcerated students. Prison educational programming can take the form of noncredit workshops taught by volunteers or complete degree-granting programs, with some colleges conducting classes within facilities. Since 2018, [Georgetown University's Prisons and Justice Initiative](#) has offered its graduates the opportunity to earn a Bachelor of Liberal Arts within the Patuxent Institution, and [New York University's Prison Education Program](#) at Wallkill Correctional Facility has provided Associate of Arts degrees since 2015. Faculty from both institutions travel weekly to offer free credit-bearing college courses to dozens of students every year. Numerous other colleges have taken alternative approaches through the [Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program](#), allowing campus-based students to take classes alongside incarcerated students within a correctional facility. This initiative fosters unique

discussions and enables participants to encounter each other as equals across profound social barriers.

However, funding these programs can often pose a challenge. This nebulous topic has been prominent in the policy world throughout the past few decades, shown by the passage of [legislation](#) both restricting and expanding access to funding for PEPs via [Pell Grants](#), a form of need-based federal aid.

According to a 2014 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, over [70 percent of incarcerated adults](#) reported a desire to enroll in an academic class or program, demonstrating a revealed preference for the implementation of PEPs among incarcerated stakeholders. However, only [21 percent of prisoners](#) were actually receiving the opportunity to study for a formal degree or certificate at this time, displaying a discrepancy between preferences and reality. Through a meta-analysis of published research conducted in 2023, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy found that prison workforce and education programs reduce the likelihood of recidivism by [14.8 percent](#). College in-prison programs can also [reduce violence](#) within facilities, [connect families](#) in prison to their loved ones, and provide the chance for [social mobility](#) in future endeavors. All of this supports the fact that education has the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of incarcerated individuals, inviting policymakers to improve access to PEPs within correctional facilities.

III. HISTORY

The history of educational programs within prisons traces back to earlier reform movements in the United States that viewed rehabilitation as a central purpose of incarceration. During the nineteenth century, prison reformers frequently argued that education could reduce criminal behavior and prepare incarcerated individuals for reintegration into society. Early prison education initiatives primarily focused on literacy programs, religious instruction, and vocational training. By the mid twentieth century, correctional institutions had begun expanding these opportunities to include high school equivalency programs and, eventually, college level courses. The broader movement toward rehabilitation in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged states and the federal government to support educational access for incarcerated individuals through public funding and partnerships with colleges and universities.

A significant development in prison education came with the passage of the Higher Education Amendments of 1972, which expanded access to federal Pell Grants for low income students, including incarcerated individuals. This legislation allowed thousands of incarcerated people to pursue higher education while serving their sentences. By the early 1990s, an estimated 772 postsecondary education programs were operating in prisons across the United States, with approximately 23,000 incarcerated students receiving Pell Grant assistance. Advocates contended that access to higher education promoted rehabilitation, reduced recidivism, and improved opportunities upon release. According to the [Jobs for the Future](#) report on Pell Grants

and prisons these educational opportunities represented one of the largest expansions of correctional education in American history.

This progress shifted dramatically following the passage of the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994](#). The legislation prohibited incarcerated individuals in federal and state prisons from receiving Pell Grants, effectively eliminating a major source of funding for prison college programs. As a result, hundreds of educational programs across correctional facilities were discontinued within only a few years. Reports indicate that the number of prison college programs declined from hundreds nationwide to only a handful by the late 1990s. Supporters of the funding ban argued that federal financial aid should prioritize non-incarcerated students, while critics maintained that the removal of educational opportunities undermined rehabilitation efforts and contributed to higher recidivism rates. The impact of this policy change was later discussed in an article by [Prison Legal News](#).

In the decades that followed, research increasingly suggested that educational programming within prisons produced measurable benefits. A widely cited [RAND Corporation study](#) found that incarcerated individuals who participated in educational programs were significantly less likely to return to prison after release and were more likely to obtain employment. The study also concluded that correctional education generated substantial economic savings by lowering incarceration costs associated with repeat offenses. These findings

contributed to renewed national interest in expanding prison education opportunities.

The modern revival of prison education programs is commonly associated with the 2015 creation of the [Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative](#) under the Obama administration. This initiative restored limited Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students through partnerships between correctional institutions and colleges. Initially involving 67 colleges and universities, the program expanded significantly over the following years. According to the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), tens of thousands of incarcerated students enrolled in postsecondary programs through the initiative, earning certificates and college degrees while incarcerated. Researchers and policymakers viewed the initiative as an effort to rebuild prison education systems that had diminished after the 1994 legislation.

Federal policy shifted further with the passage of the [FAFSA Simplification Act of 2020](#), which restored Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students beginning in 2023. This legislation marked a major change in federal correctional education policy by formally reestablishing access to financial aid for eligible incarcerated individuals enrolled in approved prison education programs. Supporters of the reform argued that educational access promotes rehabilitation, public safety, and successful reentry into society following incarceration.

Ultimately, the history of educational programs within prisons reveals the constant

debate between punishment and rehabilitation in the American criminal justice system. As federal and state policies continue to expand access to correctional education, these programs remain significant in discussions surrounding recidivism reduction, public safety, and successful reintegration into society.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

The main problem is that people in prison experienced lack of quality access to education, even though strong evidence from the [Vera Institute of Justice](#) shows that education is the clearest way to help people succeed after release and avoid returning to prison. This is problematic because when people earn a diploma, job training, or college credits, they are significantly more likely to find work, rebuild their lives, and less likely to offend. However, this policy briefly analyzes that educational programs in these prisons have been inconstant across the board because of inconsistent funding and policy support; this happened through the 1994 Pell Grant Ban, causing prison college programs to collapse. Research has shown that correctional education lowers recidivism, improves employment outcomes, and saves public money, which means that policymakers and government officials need to realize that they need to make high-quality education. This would result in supporting rehabilitation programs, strengthening reentry, and improving public safety for millions of US citizens.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

The issues surrounding education of incarcerated individuals is complicated, and involves numerous facets of the prison system. Therefore, a few key ‘building blocks’ necessary to support imprisoned individuals in attaining education have been proposed by researchers. The [building blocks](#) are as follows: proper and efficient use of available funding, access to a full range of post-secondary education opportunities for inmates, elimination of legislative restrictions, and incentives and supports to encourage participation. Our recommendations follow from this general framework.

1. Make more scholarships or educational programs [eligible](#) to incarcerated individuals as well. In 2015, the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program was made to allow Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals. The program has allowed for over [40,000](#) students to get access to post-secondary education while incarcerated. Expanding other similar programs to prisons would greatly benefit the incarcerated and give them a much necessary boosted chance at employment following their release.
2. Prisons should encourage enrollment using [automatic enrollment](#) for incarcerated inmates in a certain age group. Upon entry into the prison, inmates should be given a basic skills test, whose results can be used by officials to choose programs for the inmate with consideration of their current educational attainment. In 2024, only 16 states automatically enrolled inmates in courses or made education mandatory for those beneath literacy or attainment level. Automatic enrollment largely increases the chance of an inmate attaining education and eliminates the barrier an inmate's inability to acquire information can pose.

3. Still, access to information remains a key issue to the ability of any individual to gather the resources necessary to pursue post-secondary education. Therefore, inmates should be required to attend information sessions advertising the opportunities available to them and the reasons why they should pursue a higher education, and prisons should do their best to invite representatives from institutions accepting incarcerated individuals as students.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, educational opportunity remains to be an indispensable component of life to incarcerated individuals. As previously outlined, access to educational material has the ability to transform outcomes after re-entry into society. While the benefits of education in corrective facilities is evident, there exists a need to implement policy protecting such access. Past attempts have demonstrated immense success in this area, yet it is critical to have legal framework facilitating the promotion of such programs in modern society. Initiatives such as mandates ensuring equitable access to education and the promotion of activities such as informational sessions can all assist this process. Economic assistance, through the lens of scholarships funding educational pursuits, can additionally be fruitful to this process. In order to promote education in incarcerated settings, more diligent efforts should be made in the hope of achieving clear standards for the pursuit.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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