

NEW ENGLAND BOARD  
of HIGHER EDUCATION



# Higher Education Behind Bars

*Expanding Post-Secondary Educational Programs  
in New England Prisons and Jails*



**Brief Prepared By:**  
*Sheridan Miller, State Policy Engagement Coordinator*

"Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."

- **Bryan Stevenson**  
*Just Mercy*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Dec. 21, 2020, Congress lifted the 26-year ban on federal student aid—specifically, the Pell grant—for those who are incarcerated. The decision came after a long push for prison reforms that included calls for a greater emphasis on rehabilitation, reducing prison populations, and making prison sentences less harsh.

New England has long been a decisive voice in providing postsecondary education behind bars, and the region persevered even after Pell grants were denied to inmates following the 1994 "Tough on Crime" laws. This brief explores the statistics and demographic information of incarcerated people in New England and in the U.S. It examines the impact of higher education on recidivism, employment outcomes, and self-concept of people in the region. Our analysis also integrates qualitative data in the form of first-hand perspectives obtained in interviews with professors, Department of Corrections coordinators, and inmates themselves. We conclude by sharing promising practices that exist in the region can serve as models for creating postsecondary education programs in New England prisons.

## Key Findings:

- There are 201,860 people incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in New England, or 1.4% of the region's population. [Click here to view interactive data about the number of incarcerated individuals in New England.](#)
- Of the 45 New England prisons that publish educational data, 40 (89%) offer GED or high school courses, 28 (62%) offer associate degree-granting courses, and 8 (17%) offer bachelor's degree-granting programs. Federally, only 35% of state prisons offer college programming. [Click here to see a map and complete list of prisons with degree granting capabilities in New England.](#)
- Federally, those without a high school education recidivated at a rate of 60%, whereas formerly incarcerated people with some college experience recidivated at a much lower rate of 19.1%. In New England, though not all states measure recidivism in correlation to level of education, those states that do, indicate that the more education a person has, the less likely they are to recidivate.
- Not only does providing higher education in prisons and jails decrease recidivism, it also improves our regional economy. *For each dollar spent on educational programming behind bars, tax payers save \$4-\$5 depending on the state.*
- Higher education also has the ability to change an incarcerated person's life for the better. Having some college experience makes it easier to find a job post-release, which has a resounding personal impact, and also a significant generational one.

Being incarcerated is a uniquely dehumanizing experience. Providing higher education behind bars has proved to be beneficial to incarcerated students, their incarcerated peers, and to prison culture in general. Postsecondary education has the ability to positively change the life of an incarcerated person, as well as better the community and region into which they will eventually be released.

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# Introduction and History of Postsecondary Prison Education in New England and the United States



According to the most recently available data, **201,000 people were incarcerated, on parole, or on probation in New England in 2018, or 1.4% of the region's total population.** (Jones 2018). A variety of factors suggest why incarcerated people commit crimes, including financial difficulties, mental health challenges, community and peer pressures, and, most saliently for this report, an inconsistent and often inadequate education.

Due to inequitable educational practices that often start as early as pre-school, research shows that certain populations—most prominently people of color, boys and men, and disabled students—are susceptible to being expelled from or dropping out of high school at much higher rates than other demographics of students (namely white, economically privileged students). These higher dropout rates are strongly linked to later incarceration. Studies suggest a strong inverse correlation between incarceration and level of educational attainment: the more education an individual has, the less likely he or she is to be incarcerated (Irving, 2016). Indeed, in 2018, **25% of incarcerated people had less than a high school education compared to only 13% of the general public** (Couloute, 2018). Similarly, in terms of postsecondary attainment, 56% of the general population in the United States has some college experience, whereas only 23% of prisoners do (ibid). In 2019, **6% of incarcerated people held a bachelor's degree compared to 37% of non-incarcerated people** (Wilson, Alamuddin, and Cooper 2019).

Just as a lack of education is strongly linked to higher incarceration rates, increasing education can result in positive effects. Countless research over the years has shown that education leads to reduced recidivism. However, Conway (2020) argues that researchers need to look beyond recidivism to build their arguments in support of prison education programs. To that end, our analysis also looks at the impact of education on increased employment post-incarceration and a positive sense of self-concept. In short, post-secondary education is critical to helping reduce our prison population.



**56% of the general population in the United States has some college experience**



**23% of incarcerated people in the United States have some college experience**

While a large body of research shows that a postsecondary degree is increasingly necessary to hold a job with a family-sustaining wage, very few incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people have the credentials necessary to navigate our current economy. Despite the fact that the United States has the highest prison and jail population, as well as the highest incarceration rate in the world, at both the federal and state levels (698 per 100,000 U.S. adults in 2018), very little is being done to quell these numbers. In New England, while the numbers are lower than the national averages, the incarceration rate in the region is 370 per 100,000 adults, with Connecticut having the highest rate at 468 per 100,000 people. Our regional rates are higher than 185 other countries—**only eight countries in the world have higher incarceration rates than the New England region alone.**

Incarceration, while sometimes necessary, is a demeaning and dehumanizing experience in which a person is stripped of their autonomy, both in prison and even sometimes after their release. This lack of control over an incarcerated person's bodily autonomy, health, and safety has become especially evident in the midst of the current coronavirus pandemic. Given the close living quarters, and often unstable living situations, disease can spread rapidly within prisons and jails. **As of January 21, 2021, 355,780 people in prison in the United States had tested positive for COVID-19, and at least 2,143 incarcerated people have died from the illness since March 2020.** In New England alone, 7,627 incarcerated New Englanders have contracted the virus.

While there have been some efforts to reduce incarceration rates in the U.S.—mostly by non-profit organizations bolstered by some federal- and state-led initiatives—much of the progress made on this front ceased with the passage of the Clinton-era Tough on Crime laws. Education is one of the most effective ways to reduce recidivism and lower incarceration rates generally. Until 1994, the majority of correctional facilities in the U.S. offered inmates a wide breadth of college courses. However, widespread concerns about the War on Crime and the War on Drugs in the 1990s paved the way for the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This act, signed by Pres. Bill Clinton, eliminated the ability for incarcerated people's ability to access Pell grants to fund their college education. As a result, not only did participation in college courses among the incarcerated fall from 14% in 1991 to 7% in 2004, but also the number of states offering college programming fell from 37 to 26 within one year after the passage of the act (Phelps 2013, Erisman and Contardo 2005).

Much of the logic behind the passage of this act was spurred by a common misconception that Pell grants for incarcerated students redirected funding away from non-incarcerated students. However, we now know this is not true. The data show that, of the \$6 billion allocated to the program between 1993 and 1994, inmates only received \$35 million of the funding—or less than 1% of the total. Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that any non-incarcerated students were ever denied a Pell grant because of prisoner participation. After the passage of the 1994 act, 11 states eliminated their postsecondary education (PSE) programs for incarcerated students, and prisoner enrollment dropped by 40% within the first year (Phelps 2013, Erisman and Contardo 2005).

In 2015, the Obama administration created the Second Chance Pell Grant experiment, which provided need-based Pell grants to individuals incarcerated in federal and state prisons. In December 2020, Congress expanded the Second Chance Pell in its second COVID-19 stimulus relief bill. In the intervening years between the 1994 act and the creation of the Second Chance Pell, participation in college education programs among the incarcerated was slight: only 12,000 of the 2.3 million incarcerated people in the U.S. benefited from the first round of 2015 grants (Davis 2019). In 2016 only 35% of prisons were offered any kind of PSE options behind bars (Bender 2018).

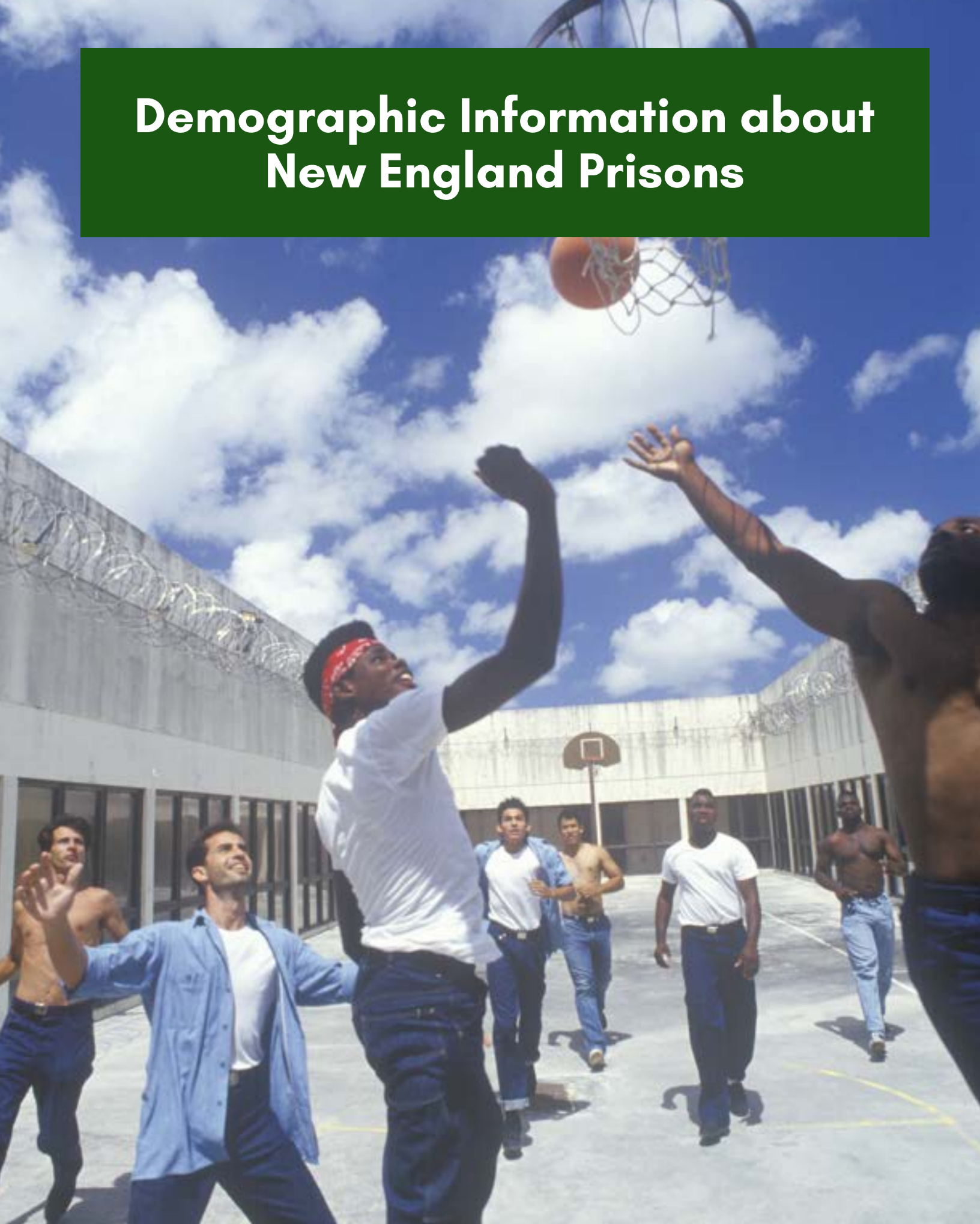
While the expansion of the Second Chance Pell Grant was a huge step, and the repeal of the ban on pell grants for incarcerated students an even bigger one, much progress is still needed before equal and high quality postsecondary education can be provided to more incarcerated individuals in New England and beyond. Future research will be instrumental in determining how the reemergence of Pell Grants will increase prisoners' financial access to higher education behind bars. Before the reinstatement of the Second Chance Pell Grant, only 42% of incarcerated peoples had access to any kind of educational programming during their incarceration. Of those who did, only 21% were pursuing a postsecondary degree—even though 79% demonstrated interest in doing so (Davis 2019).

Jule Hall, an alum of the Bard Prison Initiative corroborates this desire with his unique first hand perspective. In a recent webinar with the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), Hall said that while his college class in prison only had twelve students, upwards of 75 people went through the application process—demonstrating the remarkable level of interest in education options among the incarcerated. Not only do incarcerated people want access to more postsecondary educational programming in prison, so too does the general public support increasing their access to education. In 2010, **64% of Americans polled about crime and corrections indicated that they would prefer directing more money and effort toward further education to reduce the social and economic inequalities that cause crime.** By comparison, only 32% of respondents desired more prisons and police. Some estimates suggest that 95% of incarcerated people will eventually return to the community, and that by investing in PSE programs that have shown to reduce recidivism, we are also investing in a reduction of crime in our communities (Burke 2019).

In this brief, we examine the effects of PSE opportunities for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated in New England. For the purposes of this brief, PSE is characterized as any higher level postsecondary educational program that leads to an associate or bachelor's degree. While a significant number of occupational programs exist in prisons today, this report focuses specifically on the effects of college level programming for incarcerated people. Based on the available data, increasing PSE program offerings in the region would not only increase the autonomy and agency of prisoners and their families, but it could also provide long-term savings for taxpayers due to reduced recidivism and, therefore, reduced overall prison costs. Furthermore, the benefits of reduced recidivism also include increased community safety due to the reduction of crimes committed by previously incarcerated people. Providing PSE to prisoners also creates a generational change, as children of incarcerated people who complete a higher education are more likely to graduate high school and eventually pursue a postsecondary degree themselves.



# Demographic Information about New England Prisons

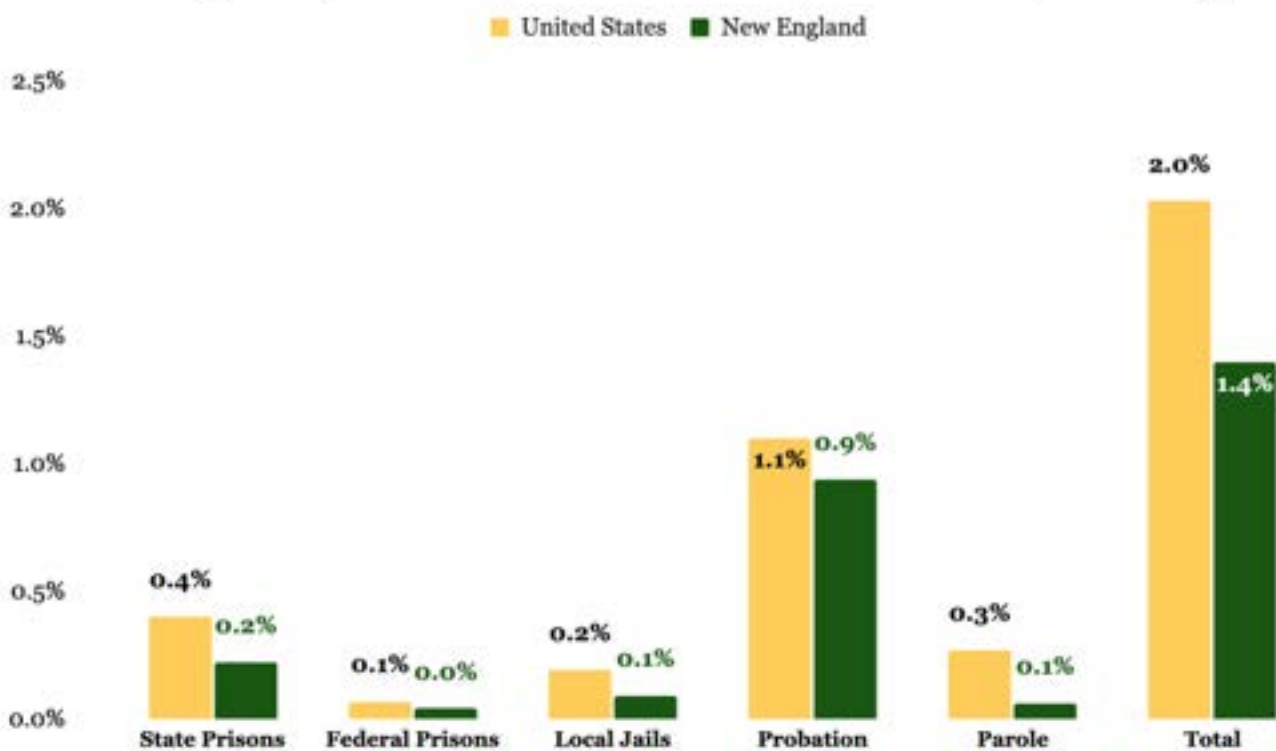


There are currently 5.3 million individuals recorded in criminal record databases in the region, and 107 million New England residents in state criminal databases nationwide (Clifford and Sullivan 2017). Most of these individuals have been charged with misdemeanors, which does not always lead to incarceration but can nevertheless make their attempts to seek employment difficult. This, in turn, can lead to more future criminal behavior and thus eventual (re-)incarceration.

**FOR INTERACTIVE DATA ABOUT THE NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF INCARCERATED PEOPLE BY FACILITY IN NEW ENGLAND CLICK HERE.**

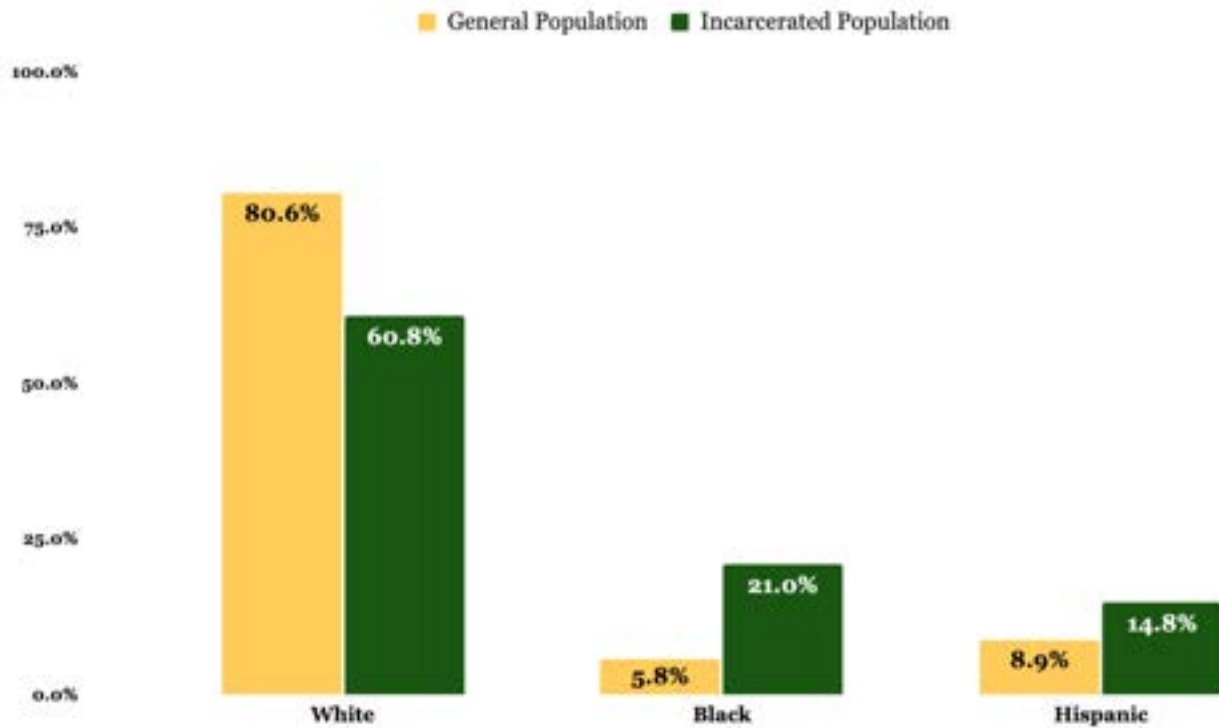
Due to a number of factors, including unequal policing, cycles of poverty, and generalized racism, the most commonly arrested demographic is young men of color. It has been posited that New England has a lower incarceration rate than other geographical areas in the U.S. due to the region’s whiter and older population relative to the rest of the country (Clifford and Sullivan 2017). In Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, Black and Hispanic/Latinx prisoners comprise the majority of the incarcerated population. Nevertheless, the percentage of the incarcerated population when measured by race/ethnicity in all six New England states, shows that Black and Latinx people are incarcerated at higher rates than white people. Despite these statistics, the racial distribution of New England’s prison population is more equitable than that of the U.S. overall.

**Percentage of Population in Criminal Justice System, U.S. and New England:  
December 2018**



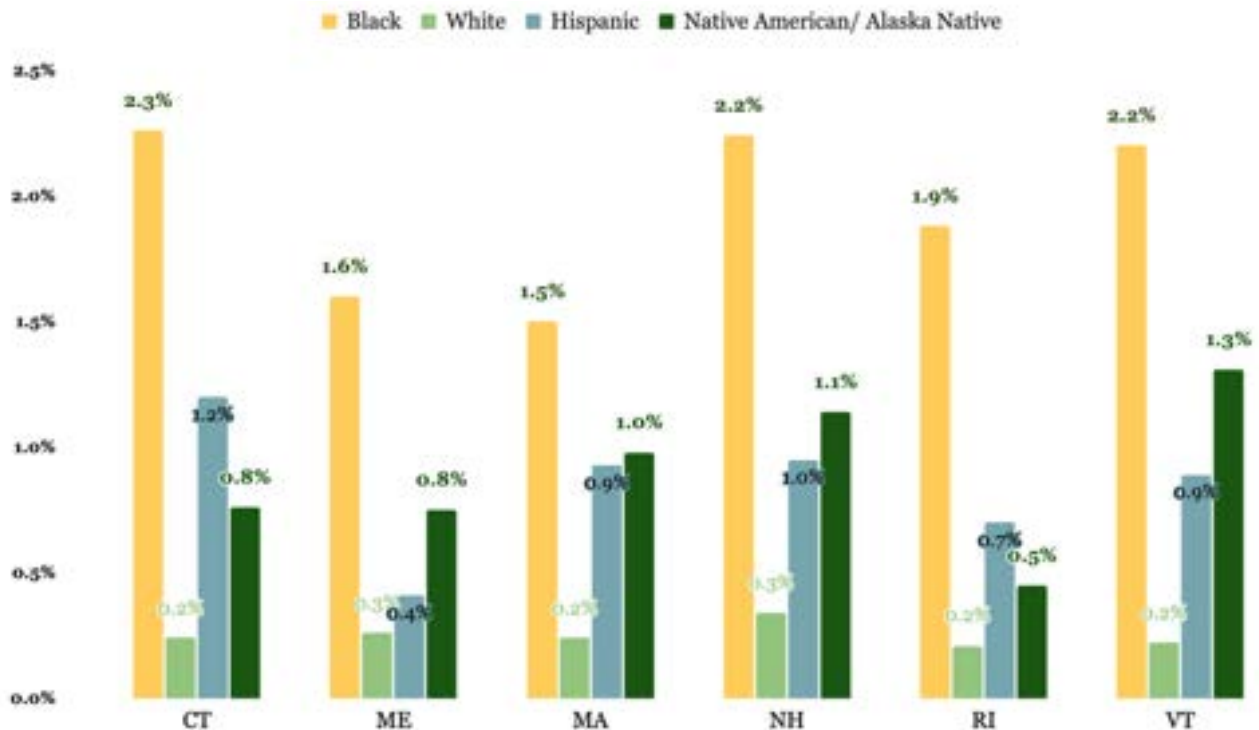
Source: NEBHE analysis of Prison Policy Initiative data

### Percentage of Population by Race/Ethnicity, Incarcerated and General: 2019



Source: NEBHE analysis of data from [Jones \(2018\)](#) and the U.S. Census Bureau

### Percentage of Incarcerated Population in New England by Race/Ethnicity: December 2018



Source: NEBHE analysis of data from [Jones \(2018\)](#)

## Demographic Information of Inmate Composition in New England Prisons and Jails: 2019



Source: NEBHE analysis of data from Jones (2018)

## New England Fast Facts About Incarceration



**Massachusetts** has the *lowest rate of incarceration in the country*, for the third year in a row as of 2020. **Maine** has the second lowest, **New Hampshire**, the fifth lowest, **Rhode Island**, the 12th lowest, **Vermont**, the 14th lowest and **Connecticut** has the *13th highest rate of incarceration in the country*.

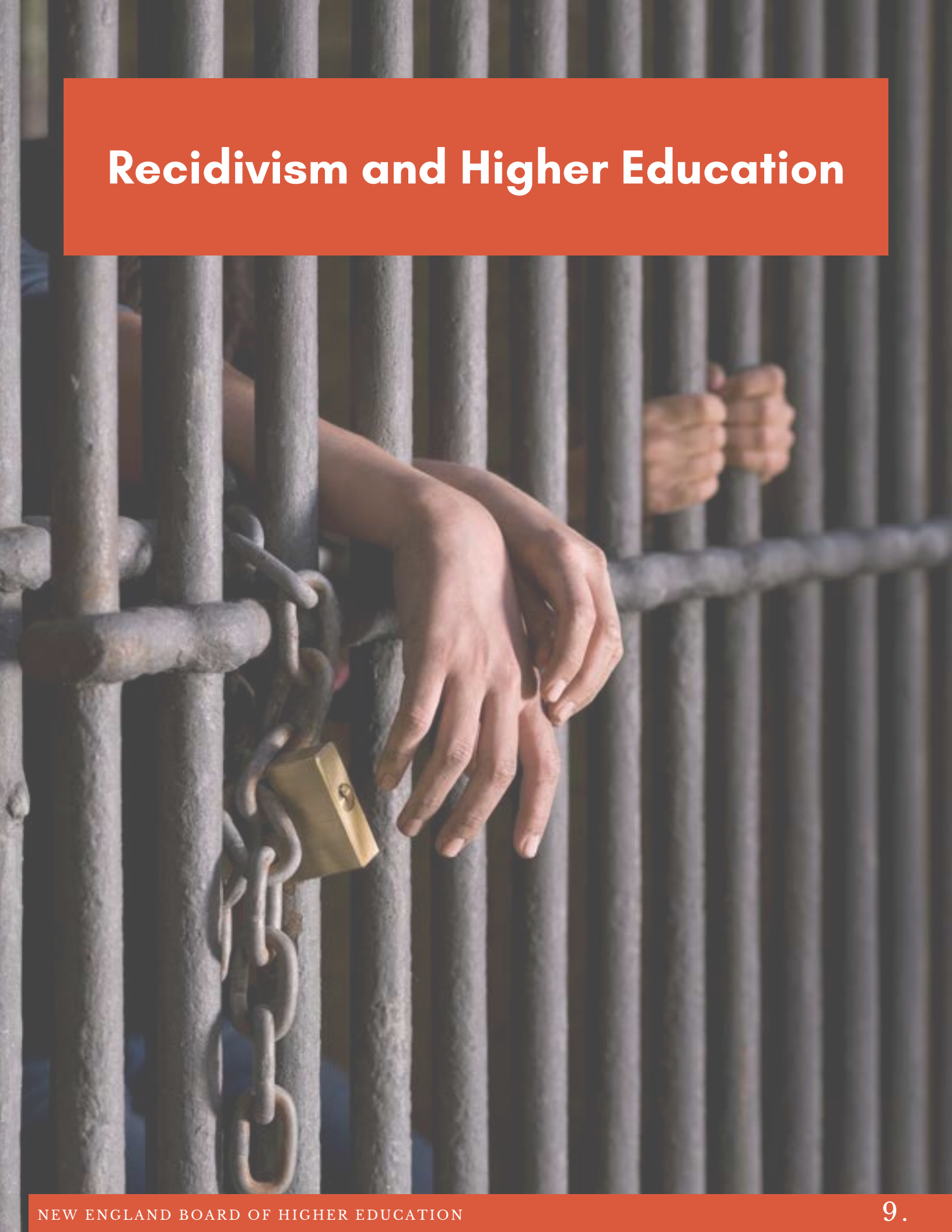


**Massachusetts** has the lowest rate of corrections expenditures in the country. However every single state in the United States spent more on the average prisoner than on the average student.



In 2007, **Connecticut** became **one of four** states in the U.S to spend more dollars on corrections than on higher education, and it also has the highest level of incarceration in the Northeast.

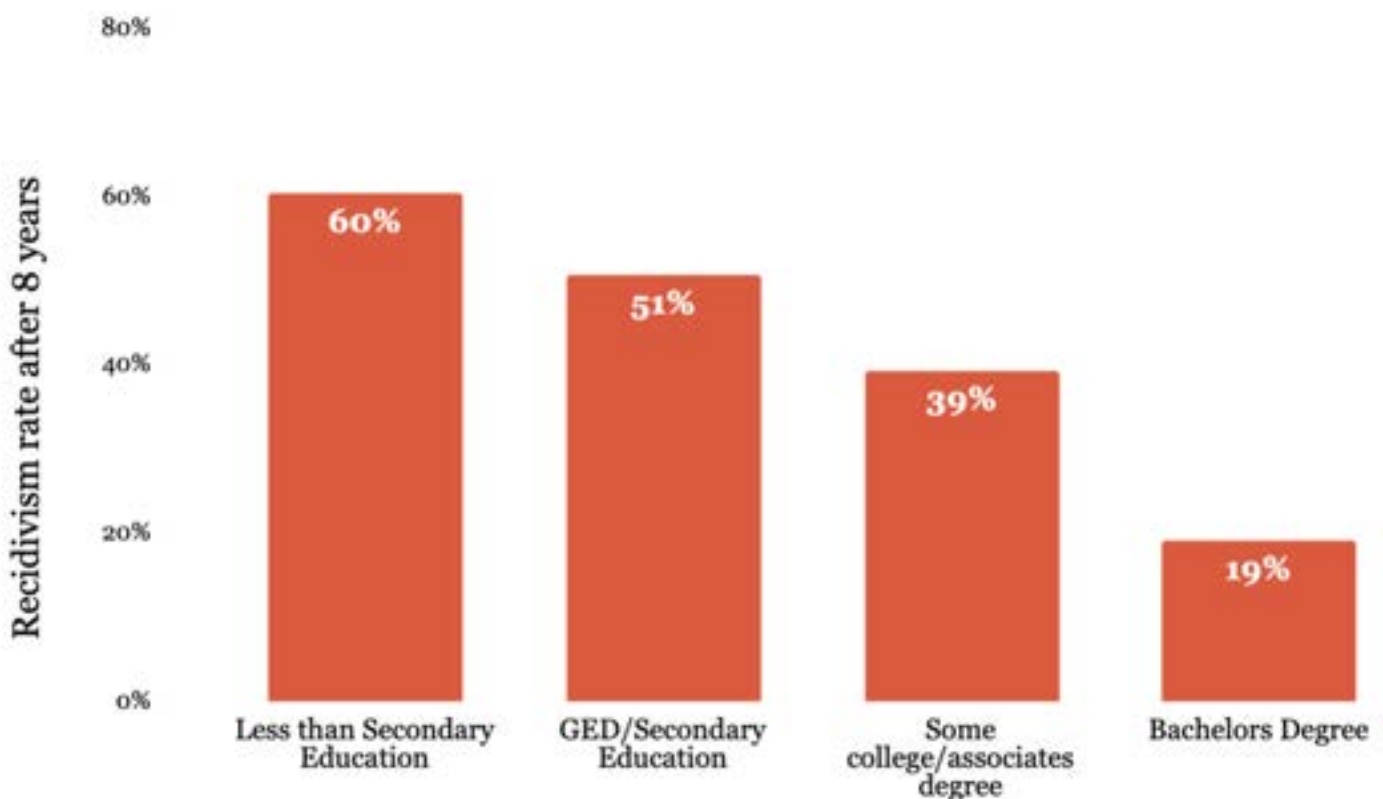
# Recidivism and Higher Education



There has been a wealth of research performed on what causes people to recidivate. PSE programs in prison can reduce recidivism by increasing the educational levels of incarcerated people. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, in 2016 almost half of people who were released from federal prisons were rearrested within eight years.

This recidivism rate varies drastically by education level. Federally, individuals lacking a high school education were rearrested at the highest rate of 60.4% compared to college degree holders, who were rearrested at the lowest rate of 19.1%.

### Federal Data on Recidivism by Type of Education: 2017



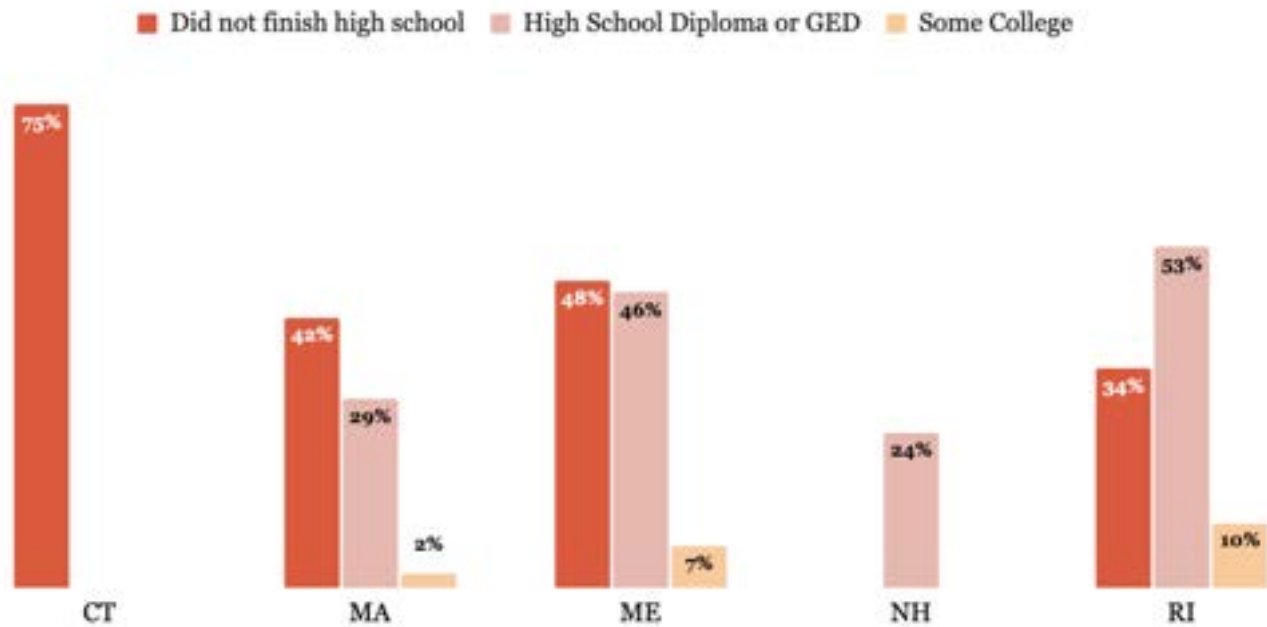
Source: Hunt and Dumville (2016)

A 1986 study by the New York Department of Correctional Services (completed in the midst of the prison boom crisis), found that those who participated in college education programs recidivated at a rate of 11% compared to those without a high school degree, whose recidivism rates were closer to 30%.

The most important thing about the 1986 study was that the individuals chosen to participate in these college education programs had been singled out as being at the highest risk for recidivism based on past histories—thus substantiating the idea that people with a high likelihood of recidivating can benefit substantially from college in prison (Harlow 2009).

In New England, 58% of all formerly incarcerated people in the region do not have a high school diploma or equivalency; by comparison, among non-incarcerated New Englanders, only 13% do not have a high school diploma or GED (Couloute 2018).

### Education Level Upon Entering Prison in New England: Year Dependent on State

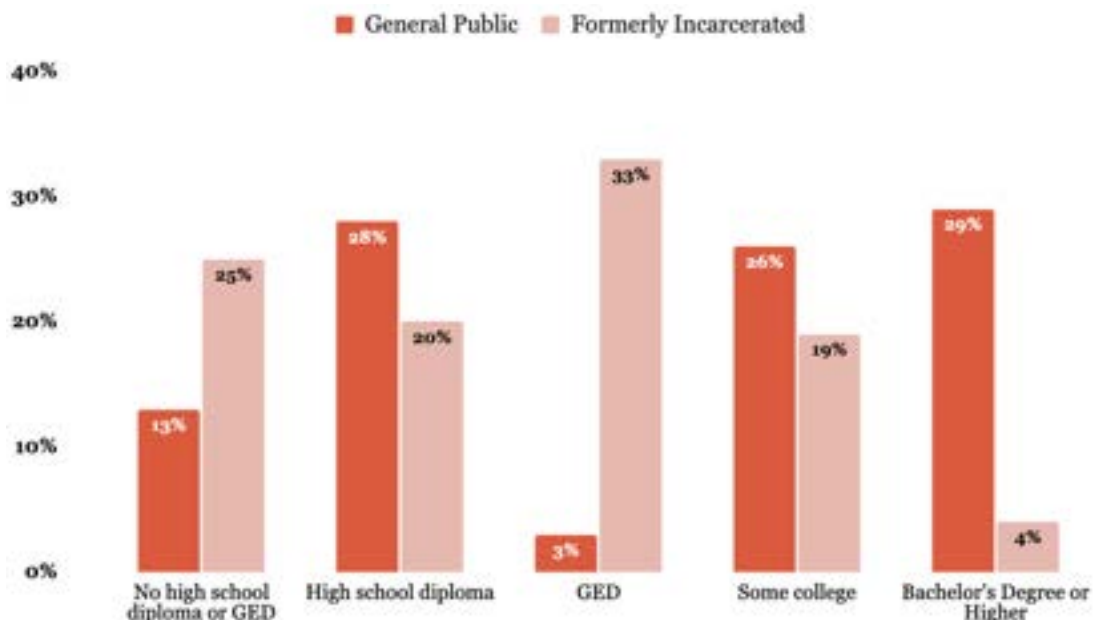


Sources: [CT Department of Corrections](#), [MA Department of Corrections](#), [ME Department of Corrections](#), [Rhode Island Department of Corrections](#), [New Hampshire Department of Corrections](#)

Note: Data unavailable for Vermont

The federal data on college degree holders in prison is even bleaker: 55% of the general public has some sort of experience with PSE (was enrolled in a bachelor's or associate degree-granting institution), whereas only 23% of the incarcerated population does (*ibid*). Similarly, 29% of the general public holds a bachelor's degree or higher, whereas only 4% of formerly incarcerated people have earned a four-year degree or higher.

### Highest Level of Education Completed in the U.S., General Public and the Formerly Incarcerated: 2019

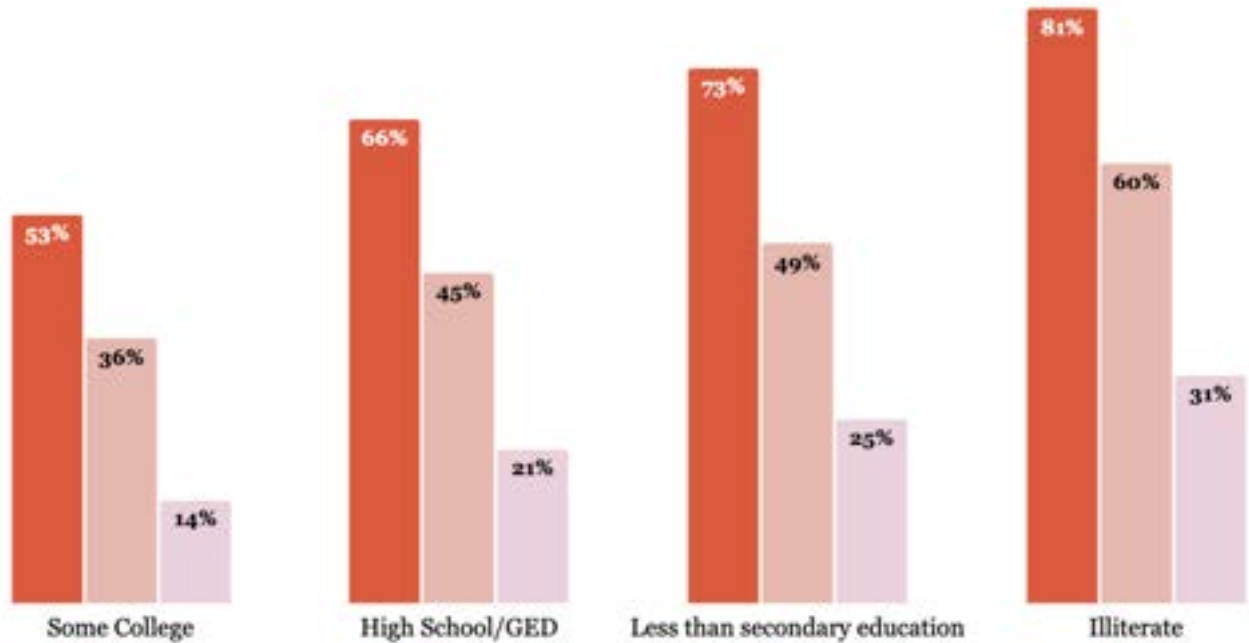


Source: NEBHE analysis of data from [Couloute \(2018\)](#)

### Impact of Education on Recidivism in Connecticut: 2001 (last year data was available)

The two year average rate of recidivism, without any external factors in CT in 2020 was 52%.

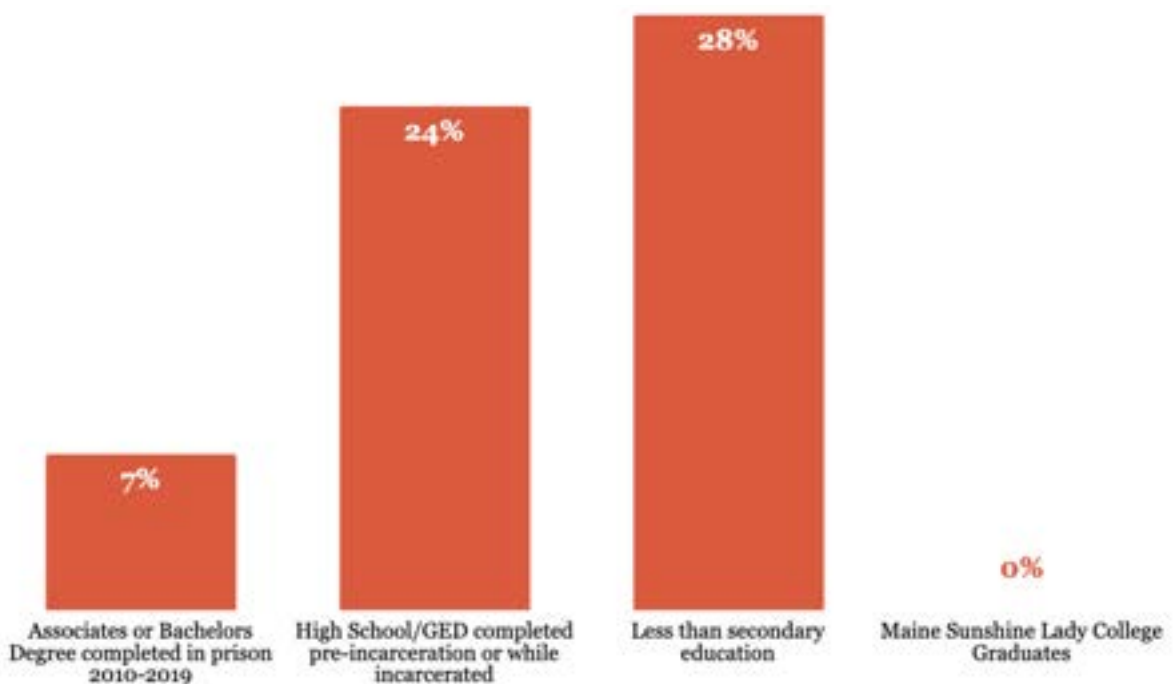
■ Rearrest rate after three years of release ■ Reconviction rate ■ Reprison rate



Source: [Connecticut Department of Corrections](#)

### Impact of Education on Nine-Year Return to Custody Rate in Maine: 2020

The average three year return to custody rate in 2011 at the beginning of a 9 year study was 34.10%

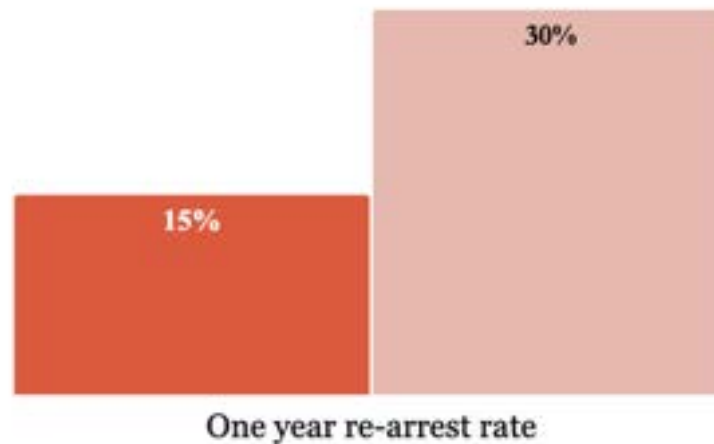


Sources: [Maine Department of Corrections](#), Sunshine Lady Foundation

## Impact of Postsecondary Education on Recidivism in Massachusetts: 2009

*In 2014, the two year average recidivism rate in MA was 34%. Those who completed high school recidivated at a rate of 32%, whereas those who had no secondary education recidivated at a rate of 42.2%*

■ Some PSE in Prison ■ No PSE in Prison



Source: [Winterfield et al. \(2009\)](#)

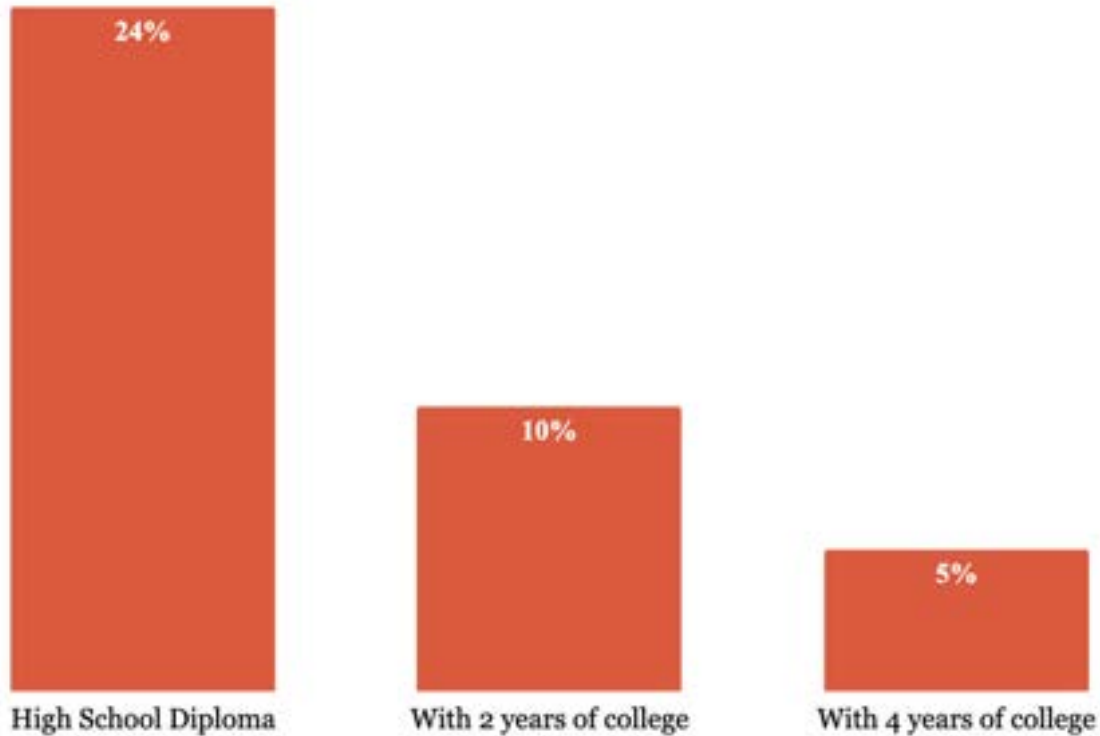
## Findings in New Hampshire

The 2019 New Hampshire average three-year recidivism rate was 46.1%. Unfortunately there is currently no available data on how recidivism is affected by post-secondary education. But there are several programs in the Granite State that bring secondary and post-secondary education to prisoners.

Source: [New Hampshire Department of Corrections](#)

## Impact of Postsecondary Education on One-Year Recidivism in Rhode Island: 2013

*In 2015 in RI the average one year recidivism rate was 32.9%*



Source: [Escobar, Jordan, and Lohrasbi \(2013\)](#)

### Findings in Vermont

**In 2013 in Vermont the three-year recidivism rate was 48.3%.** The data pertaining to recidivism and higher education is too limited to draw any conclusions. However, in 2018 U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy introduced the bipartisan **Second Chance Reauthorization Act**, which renewed Second Chance Pell Grant funding, further demonstrating Vermont's desire to use postsecondary education to help criminal justice reform.

Source: [Vermont Department of Corrections](#)

# THE PRICE OF INCARCERATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS



Mass incarceration hurts the economy in several ways. First, it depletes the workforce of working-aged adults. Our strong reliance on policing and corrections over community programs or equity-focused policies leads to a higher rate of incarceration of adults, which decreases the number of individuals available to participate in the workforce. Bucknor and Barber (2016) estimates that mass incarceration in 2008 removed 1.5 to 1.7 million workers from the workforce. Then, once prisoners are released, they often find it difficult to find work because of a stigma against hiring those who have been convicted of a crime. The same study estimates that the national GNP is \$78 billion to \$87 billion less than what it could be because a high number of so many formerly incarcerated people cannot find jobs due to this stigma of incarceration. If more people were able to access PSE while incarcerated, employment rates would increase by around 10% of what they currently are, helping both formerly incarcerated people, as well as our regional and national economies.

**Investing in PSE in prisons is initially more expensive, but will eventually save millions in re-incarceration costs and therefore create more space in tight state budgets for other imperative services.**

There exists a second, potentially greater source of economic distress caused by mass incarceration: the billions of dollars states and taxpayers spend to send large numbers of individuals to prison. A recent Vera Institute for Justice study that examined prison populations between 2015 and 2020 found that, **in the 13 states where the prison population declined during this period, total state spending also declined by \$1.6 billion** as a result of this decline. By contrast, **in seven states where the prison population increased over this same period, state spending cumulatively increased by \$254 million.** Therefore, the data suggest that there is a strong financial incentive to reduce the criminal population as one viable way to cut unnecessary state spending. According to another Vera Institute study, **expanding access to specifically postsecondary education would likely result in a decrease in incarceration costs across all states of about \$365.8 million a year.**

**Citizen Spending on Incarceration: 2019**

	State Resident	Prison Expenditures	Annual cost of prisoners for state residents	Total State Spending	Corrections Spending	Percent of total expenditures	Residents
Connecticut	3,584,730	\$1,016,118,399	\$283	30,859,000,000	847,170,170	2.20%	3.6 m
Maine				8,251,000,000	188,000,000	2.30%	1.33m
Massachusetts	6,784,240	\$594,295,857	\$88	\$61,964,000,000	1,409,000,000	2.30%	6.98m
New Hampshire				\$5,993,000,000	142,000,000	2.40%	1.356m
Rhode Island	1,055,607	\$186,349,078	\$177	\$9,305,000,000	236,000,000	2.50%	1.06m
Vermont	626088	\$116,727,820	\$186	5,557,000,000	156,000,000	2.80%	.63m

Sources: CT Department of Corrections, MA Department of Corrections, ME Department of Corrections, RI Department of Corrections, NH Department of Corrections, VT Department of Corrections, and the Vera Institute.  
Note: Some data unavailable from ME and NH

U.S. tax payers spend an average of **\$15,000 to \$70,000** per incarcerated individual. They pay an average of **\$35,000** per prisoner in the federal system. In New England, **Connecticut taxpayers spend the most per prisoner (\$62,159)**, where **New Hampshire taxpayers spend the least (\$34,155 per prisoner)**. Research has shown that reducing the mass incarceration rate in the U.S. could save taxpayers approximately \$1,400 to \$1,744 per inmate per year (Davis, et al. 2014). While most the region's states spend more on education than on corrections (incarceration specifically, not policing), nevertheless **New England spends more per prisoner than they do per student**—by as much as 35% more in Vermont. Because of education’s strong effects on reduced recidivism, instituting more programs of higher education at New England jails, would likely reduce re-incarceration rates and, consequently, also reduce the tax dollars spent on prisoners annually. While providing extra services to inmates may seem to indicate a need for raised taxes, it actually has the opposite effect. According to a 2013 RAND study, **for every dollar spent on correctional education programs, tax payers save five dollars** (David, Bozick, Steele, Saunders & Miles, 2013).

**State Spending on Incarceration and Education: 2019**

	How much does the state pay per prisoner	How much does the state pay per each p-12 student	How much is spent per student of higher education
<b>Connecticut</b>	\$62,159	\$18,958	\$8,123
<b>Maine</b>	\$52,269	\$13,278	\$7,750
<b>Massachusetts</b>	\$55,170	\$15,593	\$7,556
<b>New Hampshire</b>	\$34,155	\$15,340	\$2,806
<b>Rhode Island</b>	\$58,564	\$15,532	\$6,061
<b>Vermont</b>	\$57,615	\$14,000	\$2,846

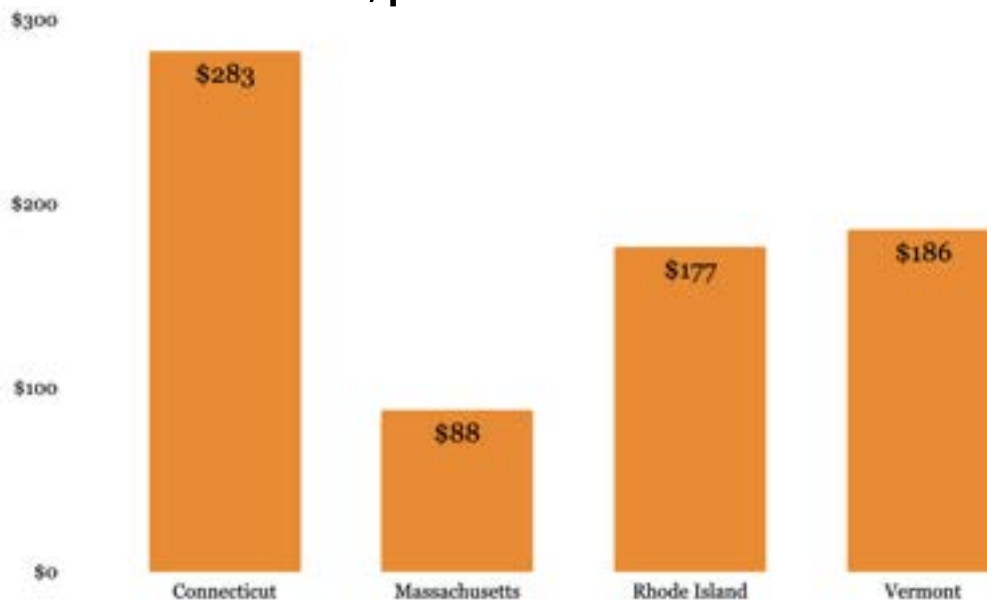
Sources: [CT Department of Corrections](#), [MA Department of Corrections](#), [ME Department of Corrections](#), [RI Department of Corrections](#), [NH Department of Corrections](#), [VT Department of Corrections](#), and the [Vera Institute](#)

The most commonly cited challenge with the expansion of PSE programs is funding. The 2020 repeal of the Pell grant ban for incarcerated students offers a promising start toward the pursuit of greater funding. The new expanded policy means that that money will now go to more colleges and institutions than the mere 130 that were previously served under the limited Obama-era experiment. Additionally, **more than 463,000 new inmates are now eligible for Pell grants** across the country under the new expansion (Douglas-Gabriel 2020). **If just half of them receive the Pell grant, the associated reduction in recidivism could save states as much as \$366 million annually** in correctional spending. If 75% of the prison population used the grant, savings would increase to \$549 million (Ibid). With the expansion of the Second Chance Pell Grant, the combined earnings of the previously incarcerated could reach \$45.3 million. In short, the evidence is clear: **maintaining the status quo is costly, to states, taxpayers, and the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated**. Expanding the Second Chance Pell Grant and higher educational opportunities for prisoners reduces state correctional spending, reduces taxes (or allows those tax funds to be redirected to other services), reduces recidivism rates, and increases opportunities for the formerly incarcerated, many of whom are traditionally underserved individuals.

Washington County Community College is a promising example of a PSE opportunity behind bars that helps increase individuals' employment chances post-incarceration. It uses technology in prisons to help formerly incarcerated individuals find gainful employment. The unique program involves recording interviews with local small businesses employers; prisoners at Maine's correctional facilities are then given access to these interviews as podcasts that teach them how to effectively seek gainful employment upon release. This program is mutually beneficial to small business owners and prisoners alike. For local employers, the program connects them to prospective talent that they need. New England is currently experiencing a kind of "brain drain," as more college graduates are migrating out of the region than are moving in. As a result, many employers are struggling to fill open positions. By connecting with college-educated prisoners, these employers have a direct lifeline to a pool of potential job candidates. Likewise, for Maine's prison population, the interviews not only teach them valuable lessons for their eventual job search, but they also introduce them to their prospective future employers. Considering the stigma mentioned above around having gone to prison, the program can improve released prisoners' chances of finding gainful employment, as they can target jobs with employers who will not discriminate against them. In short, it exposes inmates to their future local employment options.

Eastern Maine Community College provides incarcerated people with micro credentials through Lumina Foundation's All Learning Counts initiative to supply these individuals with work and education experience that will further help them find employment upon release.

**Estimated Annual Savings to States Associated with Reducing the Number of Incarcerated Individuals, per Incarcerated Person: 2015**



Source: Mai and Subramanian (2017)

A large body of research shows that the most effective way to prevent individuals from recidivating is to provide them with a high quality education that will help them find employment upon release, thereby creating more pathways for stability. Further, while state investment in prison PSE programs poses a large upfront cost (for instance, the expansion of Pell grants cost 2.7 billion dollars) these programs have been shown to save states millions in long-term re-incarceration costs. They, therefore, create more space in tight state budgets for other services or tax cuts.

# Looking Outside Recidivism: Employment & Well-being



When conducting interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals and the professors who teach behind bars, our research corroborates what [Conway \(2020\)](#) argues: While education tends to reduce recidivism and tax payer spending, researchers must also focus on how education ameliorates the inequities that land people in prison in the first place. Most American prisoners are charged with misdemeanors or non-criminal violations ([Sawyer & Wagner, 2018](#)). While a wave of true crime fascination seems to grip our country (refer only to the [top Podcast charts](#), which have murder episodes in the top ten ranking weekly), only a tiny percentage (less than 1%) of incarcerated people are serial murderers. Similarly, even though violent crimes constitute [54% of crimes](#) for which people have been incarcerated, within that category, murder is a very small part. As the recent string of capital punishments enacted by the Trump administration have shown, a person can be incarcerated—and even executed—on murder charges despite their innocence. Felony murder, for example, rules that if someone dies during the course of a felony (e.g., robbery) then everyone involved can be charged with murder even if they did not physically commit the murder ([Sawyer & Wagner 2018](#)).

All this is to say that many prisoners have been mischaracterized. Even if they did commit the crime of which they have been convicted, in many cases societal factors such as poverty, discrimination, subpar education, drug and alcohol abuse, or a plethora of other elements led them to commit the crime in the first place, rather than an inherent “badness” stemming from genetic factors or brain chemistry. Therefore, when we think about why we need to institute more higher education programs behind bars, we must also consider the obligation that society has to close the equity gaps that often cause crime to happen in the first place. This is why it is also imperative to investigate how PSE can change an individual incarcerated person's life—and their families lives—for the better.

**"There is a need to shift the conversation from just recidivism, a negative indicator, to evaluating the work students are doing, the impact they are having, and the impact education is having not only on their lives, but on their communities and families"**

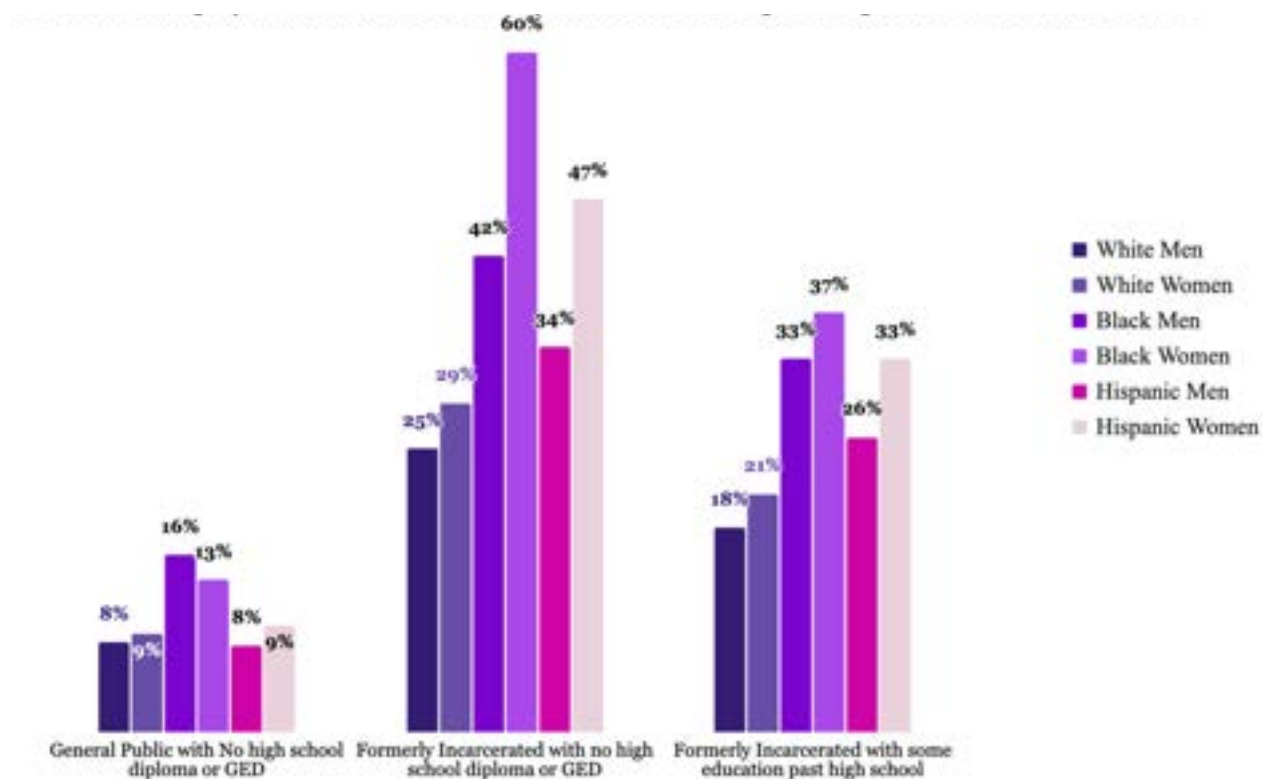
**- Jule Hall, Graduate of the Bard Prison Initiative**

Closely related to issues of recidivism and employment is the more nebulous concept of prisoners' self-esteem. For example, [interviews](#) of released inmates at San Quentin Prison revealed that this population felt the postsecondary education that they received in prison helped their mental health and self-esteem. As a result, they reported a reduced desire to recidivate. Their education also helped them to find a job more easily, thereby helping them to successfully reintegrate into society. As was previously discussed, the sooner a formerly incarcerated person finds a job upon release, the less likely they are to recidivate. Additionally, the sooner a formerly incarcerated person finds a job, the more fulfilling their life is likely to be, and the more likely they are to be able to provide a living for themselves and for their families, which helps quell generational trends of crime and poverty.

The odds of finding a job—even before the current coronavirus crisis—were incredibly low among the formerly incarcerated. **In October of 2018, the federal unemployment rate was at a record low 3.6%. However, among the formerly incarcerated, that number was 27%—a rate higher than the peak total unemployment during the Great Depression (Couloute & Kopf, 2018).** Unemployment for former prisoners is generally the highest after the first two years post-release where it averages a little over 30%. Programs of higher education are key to helping prisoners learn the skills they eventually need to reenter the “real world.” Unemployment among the formerly incarcerated becomes increasingly worse the less education they have and depending on their race or ethnicity. This is due to employer demands for higher credentials as well as the unfortunate biases present in today's workforce. On average, **formerly incarcerated men earn 11% less than those with no criminal record for doing the same job.** Even bleaker, as the graph below indicates, the federal unemployment rate for a white man with no high school diploma or GED hovers around 8% (the low end of the unemployment spectrum). However, for a formerly incarcerated Black woman, who has some PSE experience, her unemployment rate is 37%. This further demonstrates the pernicious double threat of bias due to incarceration status, and general gender and racial bias in our workforce.

**Participation in educational programming raises a previously incarcerated person’s chance of post-release employment by 13%, and employment rates raise an additional 10% for those who participated in a college program behind bars (diZerega, 2020).** While there is no New England specific data about the correlation between post-secondary education and employment, it is a logical assumption that the same kind of findings pertaining to the federal data would track with our state specific employment.

### Federal Unemployment Rates, Those Previously Incarcerated and General Public: 2018



Source: NEBHE analysis of data from [Couloute and Kopf \(2018\)](#).

# How College in Prison Increases Self-Esteem and Improves Prison Culture



Imprisonment not only results in a loss of freedom, autonomy, and opportunity, but it also has been shown to have negative psychological effects on prisoners' self-concept, or "an idea of the self constructed from the beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others" and motivation, which can create barriers to reentry into society post release ([Evans and Szkola 2017](#), [Oxford English Dictionary](#)). A 2017 study done at CUNY found that higher education did, indeed, positively impact the self-concept of prisoners ([Evans and Szkola 2017](#)). Community College of Vermont, which implements postsecondary education programs in prisons and jails throughout the Green Mountain State, recently disseminated surveys to incarcerated participants to gauge how they had learned and grown while enrolled in these programs. One respondent stated, "I have gained more confidence in myself and have become more social. Living with PTSD has become less difficult; I have a more positive outlook on my life and the future of my children and fellow classmates can see the change in me." This is one of many recorded responses where an incarcerated person participating in higher education has clearly seen a shift in their own self-concept and ability to navigate life both within prisons and in the community upon their release.

**"I have gained more confidence in myself and have become more social. Living with PTSD has become less difficult. I have a more positive outlook on my life and the future of my children."**

***- Surveyed prisoner who participated in a  
Community College of Vermont program behind bars***

Self-esteem and self-concept affect how a person chooses to live his or her life. Oftentimes, incarcerated people will express the feeling that society has given up on them, and thus that they have given up on themselves. **Education is the most cited need of inmates leaving jail, above both financial assistance and employment help** ([Couloute 2018](#)). Giving incarcerated people access to higher education gives them the tools they need to reinvest in their perception of self. When their self-esteem is raised, they feel more capable of being released into communities without a desire to participate in anti-social behavior, as well as feeling more capable of finding a job to thus lower their probability of recidivating. Among professors, coordinators, and department of corrections staff from all six New England states, the most common sentiment shared was that **providing postsecondary education to prisoners gives them their humanity back in a system where humanity is often stripped away**. Lee Perlman of the MIT Educational Justice Institute expressed this shared notion: "Providing college in prison not only positively impacts prisoner self-concept, but it also changes the culture of prison for the better. My incarcerated students often work harder than my 'traditional' MIT students."

Postsecondary education programs in prisons also have the potential to revolutionize prison culture, which is bleak at best and violent at worst. Attending college classes is associated with improved social climate in prisons and improved interpersonal communication. It also helps to reduce disciplinary infractions among inmates (Bender 2018). Not only does postsecondary education create a safer prison environment, it also “enhances critical thinking by compelling incarcerated people to channel their often prodigious street smarts into more sophisticated forms of inquiry and analysis” (Winterfield et al. 2010).

A college education not only improves the quality of formerly incarcerated individuals' lives, but it also helps them to navigate an often biased job market and gives them the perseverance to keep searching past rejection. Jule Hall, the previously mentioned alum of the Bard Prison Initiative: “When I was released, there was nothing I didn’t think I could do. Even when I was denied from employment, the college courses I took gave me the persistence to keep trying.”

**“The most dangerous offender who is incarcerated is a hopeless offender... if you give prisoners programs, you give them hope.”**  
- *Mary-Ellen Masorilli*

Professors and contacts within departments of corrections from Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont all told NEBHE that the culture within prisons improved when higher education was introduced into these facilities. One surveyed incarcerated prisoner in a Vermont facility expressed that **college education programs transform the prison culture in such a way that it begins to mirror that of a college campus**. Perhaps the most promising statement comes from former correctional officer turned facilitator of Boston University’s prison education program (one of the oldest in the country), Mary-Ellen Mastorilli: “I’m not a softie, but even I can see the transformation in these men and women, and it’s really hard to describe. The most dangerous offender who is incarcerated is a hopeless offender, if you give prisoners programs, you give them hope.”



# Current New England Programs and Promising Practices



In New England, of the 45 prisons that publish educational data, there are currently **40 (89%)** that offer GED or high school courses, **28 (62%)** that offer associates degree-granting courses, and **8 (17%)** that offer bachelor's degree-granting programs. Federally, only 35% of state prisons offer college programming ([Bender 2018](#)).



[Click here to explore an interactive map of all the educational programs in NE prisons and jails.](#)

## PROMISING PRACTICES IN NEW ENGLAND

**Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium (MPEC)**: MPEC is managed by The Educational Justice Institute at MIT and funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the Vera Institute of Justice. MPEC was established to close many of the gaps in higher education facilitation across Massachusetts prisons and jails. Massachusetts has the broadest range of individual programs of higher education in prisons run through several autonomous colleges and universities, including those linked in the map above. MPEC tries to navigate some of the challenges of having multiple universities with multiple programs, such as credit transfer, a streamlined way to award bachelor's or associate degrees, tracking inmate progress, sorting inmates into different facilities based on level of education, and central record keeping to track certain metrics such as recidivism and employment. As Lee Perlman, one of the directors says, "The big picture is that we have all of these things happening, things that aren't necessarily coordinated, and we don't have much control over where people go in prison. Even if someone gets into a college program, they could be transferred to another facility that doesn't offer courses. Therefore we would like to see a program that upon intake, determines education as being a significant part of classification determining which facility you end up in. This way we can make sure that students can finish up a degree or convert their credits into a program where they can get some sort of professional certification."

MPEC currently has fifty universities, colleges and community colleges in its consortium that are striving to better regulate higher education in prisons in Massachusetts. MPEC is also unique in that it is a collaborative body, not only of colleges, but also of multiple contacts within the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, so that everyone involved in this process has a say, not just those on the academic front. The eventual goal of the program is to provide transitional educational opportunities for previously incarcerated people who often run into stumbling blocks upon trying to continue their education once they re-enter into the "real world." Mary Ellen Mastorilli of BU's prison education program is particularly optimistic about this program: "There are definitely institutional challenges with this work, but we're trying to resolve them through MPEC."

**An Employment-Specific Promising Practice from Maine:** A shining example of a program utilizing modern technology with the intention of providing employment opportunities through education to previously incarcerated people in New England is the program facilitated by Eastern Maine Community College (EMCC). EMCC is one of many colleges in Maine (including those in the University of Maine system) that has put resources towards expanding higher education in prisons. Unlike the programs traditionally offered elsewhere, those in Maine allow for limited technology use among inmates. Without internet access and with sparse libraries, the information that inmates can typically access is incredibly limited due to restricted access to the internet and libraries—even among those enrolled in postsecondary education behind bars.

Maine, however, has introduced learning via tablets so that inmates stay connected with their courses—even now during the COVID-19 pandemic during which professors cannot enter facilities. Not only is this technology important for the access to information for students behind bars, but it is also used in order to grant certificates and micro credentials in a program run by EMCC. This pilot program allows inmates who register to earn micro badges in life-readiness, education-readiness, and work-readiness. The classes used towards these micro badges are taken at inmates' own speeds and are also used in the Maine Community College system and are thus recognized by Maine employers. They provide an added incentive for these employers to hire previously incarcerated people regardless of their oftentimes polarizing identity as being previously incarcerated.

**The University of Maine System in General:** The University of Maine System along with Maine Community colleges have also utilized this tablet technology to bring classes to inmates. University of Maine Augusta programs were previously funded by the Doris Buffett Lady Sunshine Foundation to grant bachelor's degrees to individuals. Recently, UMA programs have transitioned to using Second Chance Pell Grant funding and the majority of their programming now focuses on granting associate degrees. One of the main reasons that Maine is far ahead of other states with their utilization of technology for incarcerated learning is because of the institutional support they get from the Maine Department of Corrections. Deborah Meehan, the point-person for UMA's prison education programs, has stated, "Our commissioner (Randall Liberty) will be the first to say, our college students do not come back. We have less than 1% recidivism rate with that population."

Meehan also says that with the implementation of restorative justice practices in many Maine prisons (an alternative to more retributive punishment measures in prisons focused on interpersonal problem-solving and a commitment to facing adversity through dialogue), college programs are able to flourish. When inmates are treated as people rather than as dangerous "others" living on the outskirts of appropriate society, they are better able to focus on trying to navigate their pasts and change their previously antisocial behavior upon release. A big takeaway from the success of Maine's programs is that supportive commissioners and other leaders in prison systems make it easier to create greater structural change and progress at facilities of incarceration.

**The Inside Out Program:** The Inside Out Program is a national organization run across many states, including Connecticut, Maine and Massachusetts, in partnership with local universities. The slogan of Inside Out is “Social Change Through Transformative Education,” and the program is true to its motto. Through this program, a small group of college students in participating universities go to a local prison or jail each week and take a four-credit course along with incarcerated or “Inside students.” The mission of the program is not only to grant credits to Inside and Outside learners, but to foster a sense of greater humanity and understanding among both the Inside and Outside students who, by the end of the semester, are no longer people from vastly differing backgrounds, but rather peers and classmates learning the same college level material.

Many Inside students provide testimony at the end of the semester about how this one course encouraged them to focus on studies during the week so that the privilege of their education wouldn’t be revoked, and how this class also inspired them to strive to earn further credits and learn more about the society into which they would eventually be returning. Currently Inside Out Programs are run through sixteen New England universities and twenty-one correctional facilities in Connecticut, Maine and Massachusetts.

### Inside-Out Students at The University Of Georgia



Photo source: [Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the University of Georgia](#)

# Challenges and Suggestions Moving Forward



Across the region, and across both correctional facilities and universities, the most commonly cited challenge for these programs was costs. While it is less expensive to educate incarcerated people in the long run, the initial launch of a program costs money. Key players, such as Lee Perlman of MPEC, Deborah Meehan of UMA, and Mary-Ellen Mastorilli of Boston University's prison education program, all advocate for the expansion of Pell grants and the further allocation of state dollars to fund more robust prison education programs. Now that federal funding has been restored for prisoners, the next step, in their eyes, is to get further state buy-in through allocated state level funds. Annabel Davis-Groff from Bennington College reiterated this sentiment to NEBHE: “There is an increasing willingness and desire to educate incarcerated people. [...] It’s all about the money. If someone gave me one million dollars, I would open up another program in the prison across the street.”

From a policy perspective, one of the best things we can do is to continue to advocate for both the expansion of more funding and more innovation within prisons. The coronavirus has exposed and exacerbated the disparities among Americans. While the American way of life is ostensibly built on the principles of equality and opportunity, some people—namely poor, non-white citizens—often grow up in unhealthy environments where they are exposed to disproportionate punishment by police and educators as early as preschool. These children, when they grow into adults, tend to be left with a sour taste in their mouths when continuously berated by educators who treat their white peers differently. While we cannot go back in time and stop a preschool teacher from suspending a Black child for normal toddler behavior, we can try to help those who have become incarcerated due to years of abuse by programs meant to serve them. We can ask that funds currently being used for more retributive forms of justice be reallocated instead toward more educational programming behind bars.

Prison strips away the humanity of incarcerated people in a way that cannot be recognized until one has experienced it. Not only is providing higher education a way to reduce recidivism, reduce taxation, and keep communities safe, but also, from a human standpoint, such courses give incarcerated people a label other than “criminal.” They allow them to be students. This opportunity has the capacity to change the trajectory of one’s life—a sentiment that has been echoed by almost all incarcerated students who have taken part in such courses.

Another policy recommendation that is important to push for in our region, is the potential expansion of technology behind bars. As Maine has shown the rest of the country, providing technology, such as tablets, to incarcerated students not only helps their learning process, but can also be beneficial for local communities who will be able to hire technologically competent employees upon their release. Further, laws should be adopted that inhibit discrimination in employment based on a person's previous incarceration involvement.

If we can communicate the proven effectiveness of how higher education in prisons and jails reduces recidivism and the associated costs of imprisonment, increases employment (and therefore helps state economies), and similarly increases the self-esteem of incarcerated people leading to less generational incarceration and poverty, then maybe we can continue to expand these programs. It is clear that higher education in prisons is effective for all those involved. Professors say that it is the most meaningful teaching they have done in their lives. Incarcerated people see themselves transform into more capable individuals learning from systems that had previously oppressed them. Commissioners and correctional officers see a transformation of prison culture. Tax payers ultimately save \$5 for every dollar invested in these programs. For all of the aforementioned reasons, it is therefore imperative that we continue to expand the reach of postsecondary education in prisons and jails across New England

### Graduating Students of Washington University's Prison Education Program in 2019



Photo source: [The Prison Education Project](#)