

The Impacts of College Education in Prison: An Analysis of the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative

Postsecondary education in prison has positive effects for students who are incarcerated, their families and communities, public safety, and safety inside prisons. Research has demonstrated that postsecondary education reduces incarceration, makes prisons safer places to live and work, and improves employment and wages.¹ Nationally, taxpayers also see major benefits, with every dollar invested in prison-based education yielding more than four dollars in taxpayer savings from reduced incarceration costs.² Most people in prison are both interested in and academically qualified for postsecondary education (64 percent), yet only a tiny fraction of people in prison completes a credential while incarcerated (9 percent).³ This gap between educational aspirations and participation is driven largely by a lack of capacity due to limited funding.

Prior research has shown that postsecondary education for incarcerated people brings benefits such as reduced prison misconducts, lower recidivism, and improved employment outcomes.^a

The College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative

The Manhattan District Attorney's Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) funded the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP) to close this gap by expanding access to academic college education in prisons throughout New York State. The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted a research study to understand the impacts of college participation on behavior in prison, contacts with the criminal legal system, employment, and income using a common quasi-experimental approach. Vera also conducted a costing analysis to understand the resources needed to implement and scale college-in-prison programs, including the delivery of instruction, student services, supports, and reentry services. This factsheet presents initial findings of a larger study to be completed in 2024.

Methodology

The study gathered data from various sources, including college providers, the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, the New York Division of Criminal Justice Services, and the New York Department of Labor. It involved CJII-funded students and similar non-students, focusing on their incarceration periods, eligibility for education, employment, wages, and conviction histories.

Using a quasi-experimental approach called propensity score matching, Vera researchers selected non-students for comparison based on criteria similar to the students. Variables for comparison included demographics, conviction history, correctional characteristics, and educational attributes. Outcomes assessed included in-facility behavior ("misconducts"), new convictions post-release, and employment status and wages after release. Vera researchers applied regression analysis techniques to estimate differences

between groups and the impact of college education on the time until a new conviction occurred post-release. For the full report, including more information on the methodology and a description of propensity score matching, visit <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-impacts-of-college-in-prison>.

Key Findings

Recidivism

People who participated in college-in-prison programs were at least 66 percent less likely to have another conviction within six months, 12 months, or at any point after release (up until September 2021) within the study period compared to incarcerated people who did not participate. This effect is notably stronger than researchers have previously observed for postsecondary education in prison.⁴

Wages

The impact of college participation on formal employment and wages showed mixed results. In the first two quarters following release, students were 30 percent less likely to find employment; however, this effect was not significant over four quarters. Additionally, students earned nearly \$3,900 less over the first four quarters following release compared to non-students. These findings may be attributed to the difficulty in accounting for pre-incarceration employment and wages as data was not available. Thus, further research is required to better understand these outcomes.

Misconducts

Vera researchers did not observe any significant differences in the number of misconducts between non-students and students after beginning postsecondary education. This lack of difference may in part be due to the strict behavioral eligibility criteria both groups had to meet for inclusion in the sample, leading to a low baseline level of misconduct.

Costs

Colleges need resources beyond those that the CIP Reentry Initiative provides. While CIP—funded through CJII—was successful in supporting a scale-up of college-in-prison programming, colleges, nonetheless, had to use additional funding sources or in-kind donations of time and materials to fund education programs and to provide reentry services. This indicates single, time-limited grants—such as those available through CJII—are useful as a component of blended or braided funding models but colleges cannot depend on them as a single source of funding in perpetuity.

Implications and Next Steps

The findings of this study show that academic college programs in prison are very effective at reducing future convictions. Yet, interest in college in prison among prospective students far outstrips the ability of institutions of higher education to provide that programming, due in no small part to severe resource constraints. In such a context, funding through initiatives such as CJII not only supports the aspirations of people who are incarcerated but also promotes public safety. As CJII ends, the reinstatement of funding through the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) in New York State—and Pell Grants at the national level—will play a significant role in closing the aspiration gap, expanding college programs, and improving safety and well-being. This benefits students, prospective students, and their families and communities—all while reducing expenditures on incarceration. Investing in postsecondary education in prisons unlocks myriad benefits that extend far beyond individual students and their families. It has the power to strengthen communities and enhance public safety, all while securing for students themselves the numerous benefits inherent to education. Highlighting these benefits and celebrating student success are important pathways to continue to garner support for these programs.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this fact sheet, contact Niloufer Taber, associate director for research, at ntaber@vera.org.

About this report

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Endnotes

¹ Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Lois M. Davis, and Susan Turner, "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14, no. 3 (2018), 389–428, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/does-providing-inmates-education-improve-postrelease-outcomes-meta>; Kyleigh Clark and Jason Rydberg, "The Effect of Institutional Educational Programming on Prisoner Misconduct," *Criminal Justice Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016), 325–344, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2016.1229770>; Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013),

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html; Human Impact Partners, *Turning on the TAP: How Returning Access to Tuition Assistance for Incarcerated People Improves the Health of New Yorkers* (Oakland, CA: Human Impact Partners, 2015), <https://perma.cc/C3S6-POG4>; Karen F. Lahm, "Educational Participation and Inmate Misconduct," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 48, no. 1 (2009), 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509670802572235>; and Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf>.

² Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2017), <https://perma.cc/C3FG-KJUL>. Further discussion of RAND's research portfolio on correctional education is available at <https://perma.cc/SR9R-8HQC>. For further discussion of cost savings associated with postsecondary education, also see Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://perma.cc/YP7W-UJ2J>.

³ Ruth Delaney and Lionel Smith, *Understanding Educational Aspiration among People in Prison* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2019), 21, <https://perma.cc/KVM3-TPPA>; Oakford, Brumfield, Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures*, 2019, 1.

⁴ For a review, see Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Lois M. Davis, and Susan Turner, "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes," 2018.

Textbox note

^a For information on reduced misconduct, see Amanda Pompoco, John Wooldredge, Melissa Lugo, et al., "Reducing Inmate Misconduct and Prison Returns with Facility Education Programs," *Criminology & Public Policy* 16, no. 2 (2017), 515–547, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12290>; Karen F. Lahm, "Educational Participation and Inmate Misconduct," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 48, no. 1 (2009), 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509670802572235>; Kyleigh Clark and Jason Rydberg, "The Effect of Institutional Educational Programming on Prisoner Misconduct," *Criminal Justice Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016), 325–344, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2016.1229770>. For information on improved employment rates and public safety, see Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Lois Davis, and Susan Turner, "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14, no. 3 (2018) 389–428, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/does-providing-inmates-education-improve-postrelease-outcomes-meta>.