



# Research Brief

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## Education as Crime Prevention *Providing education to prisoners*

### [The History of Higher Education in Prison](#)

**In 1965, Congress passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which explicitly permitted inmates to apply for financial aid in the form of Pell Grants to attend college. The passage of Title IV allowed for the expansion of what had been a smattering of higher education programs in correctional facilities. The number of programs peaked in 1982 at over 350 available in 90% of the states. [41](#)**

**In the 1970s, studies [42](#) were conducted to determine the achievements of correctional higher education. Success was measured by the rate of re-arrest and the offender's ability to obtain and maintain employment upon release. The results were overwhelmingly positive, indicating that higher education was responsible for reducing an individual's chances of returning to crime, which in turn resulted in**

This research brief presents the most recent data on the impact of education on crime and crime prevention, and examines the debate on providing higher education to inmates.

*"We must accept the reality that to confine offenders behind walls without trying to change them is an expensive folly with short-term benefits -- winning battles while losing the war."* -- Former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger 1

In response to the American public's growing fear of crime and the call for more punitive measures to combat such fear, many legislators and policymakers have promoted building more prisons, enacting harsher sentencing legislation, and eliminating various programs inside prisons and jails.

With re-arrest rates averaging around 60%, it is clear that incarceration alone is not working. In fact, the drive to incarcerate, punish, and limit the activities of prisoners has often resulted in the elimination of strategies and programs that seek to prevent or reduce crime.

For instance, research shows that quality education <sup>2</sup> is one of the most effective forms of crime prevention. Educational skills can help deter young people from committing criminal acts and can greatly decrease the likelihood that people will return to crime after release from prison. Despite this evidence, educational

**savings by reducing the costs of incarceration and victimization, and by providing skilled workers to the economy.**

**In the early 1990s, elected officials began introducing legislation to prohibit federal tuition assistance to inmates. A counter-effort, started by educators, correctional officials, prison advocates, and prisoners themselves managed to stave off the legislation until 1994, when the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act effectively dismantled correctional higher education.**

**The Elimination of Federal Support for Correctional Higher Education**

**Despite tremendous evidence supporting the connection between higher education and lowered levels of recidivism, the U.S. Congress included a provision in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 which denied all prisoners access to federal Pell Grants. The provision was initiated to appeal to the notion that prisons have become places of leisure, and that inmates were given access to higher education at the expense of law-abiding taxpayers.**

**Yet prisoners who were eligible for federal tuition assistance never received support for college tuition at the expense of those in the free world. Pell Grants are non-competitive, need-based federal funds available to any and all qualifying low-income individuals who wish to attend college degree programs. The pool of money available for Pell Grants is not limited, and is only dictated by the number of individuals**

programs in correctional facilities, where they have proven to be extraordinarily effective, have in many cases been completely eliminated.

Over 1.6 million individuals are housed in adult correctional facilities in the United States, 3 and at least 99,682 juveniles are in custody. 4 The majority of these individuals will be released into the community unskilled, undereducated, and highly likely to become re-involved in criminal activity. With so many ex-offenders returning to prison, it is clear that the punitive, incarceration-based approach to crime prevention is not working. We need to promote policies and procedures that are successful. Education, particularly at the college level, can afford individuals with the opportunities to achieve and maintain productive and crime-free lives, and help to create safer communities for all.

### **The Educational Level of Offenders Is Low**

Most individuals involved in the criminal justice system come from low-income, urban communities, which are also the most likely to be under-served in terms of educational support programs. Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of the incarcerated are undereducated. To a great extent, the inadequate education of juvenile and adult offenders reflects the failures and inadequacies of public inner-city education.

### **Juvenile Offenders**

While illiteracy and poor academic performance are not direct causes of criminal behavior, young people who have received inadequate education or who exhibit poor literacy skills are disproportionately found within the criminal justice system.

- According to a study conducted by Project READ, a national program designed to improve reading skills, youth that are confined to correctional facilities at the median age of 15.5 years and in the ninth grade read, on average, at the fourth-grade level. 5 More than one-third of all juvenile offenders of this age group read below the fourth-grade level.6
- Ninety percent of teachers providing reading instruction in juvenile correctional facilities reported that they had "students who [could not] read material composed of words from their own oral vocabularies." 7

**who apply and qualify. Whether in or out of prison, an individual must meet the exact same criteria to be awarded a Pell Grant.**

**For qualifying individuals in correctional facilities, the average Pell Grant award was less than \$1,300 per year. 43 The total percentage of the Pell Grants' annual budget that was spent on inmate higher education was 1/10 of 1%. 44**

**As a relatively small percentage of in-mates attended higher education programs and actually received federal tuition assistance, Pell Grant support directly affected only a small part of the prison population. 45 Still, this support had a large and lasting impact on entire correctional systems.**

**- Educated prisoners often serve as teachers and tutors for other inmates, and often as examples and role models.**

**- Educational programs help to provide structure and lessen the need for supervision, and in the words of one federal prison warden, "help to keep the prison running smoothly." 46**

**As the impact of federal higher-education tuition support was felt beyond the lives of individual recipients, the denial of financial assistance to inmates has also reverberated.**

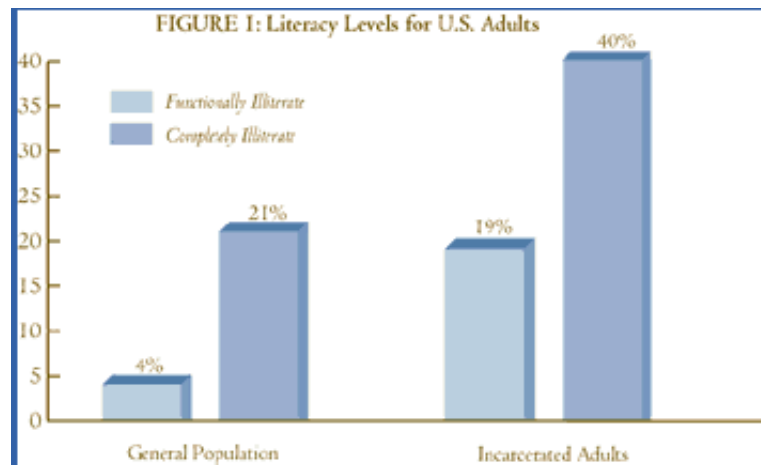
**- At least 25 states have cut back on vocational and technical training programs since the Pell Grants were cut. 47 In 1990, there were**

- Approximately 40% of youth held in detention facilities may have some form of learning disability. <sup>8</sup>

With such high rates of learning disabilities and poor educational skills, juvenile offenders are desperately in need of quality education, yet are likely to be denied it. For example, juvenile offenders in adult prisons can be prevented from participating in GED programs because of their age, and those requiring special education services are, in some facilities, no longer eligible to receive such education upon incarceration. <sup>9</sup>

In most cases, once juveniles are incarcerated, even for a short time, their line to education is forever broken. Most juvenile offenders aged 16 and older do not return to school upon release or graduate from high school. <sup>10</sup>

There is a strong link between low levels of education and high rates of criminal activity, and one of the best predictors of adult criminal behavior is involvement with the criminal justice system as a juvenile. With so few resources devoted to the education of juvenile offenders, it is not surprising that so many remain involved in the criminal justice system well into their adult lives.



### Adult Offenders

Like their juvenile counterparts, adults involved in the criminal justice system are severely undereducated. Nineteen percent of adult inmates are completely illiterate, and 40% are functionally illiterate, which means, for example, that they would be unable to write a letter explaining a billing error. <sup>11</sup> Comparatively, the national illiteracy rate for adult Americans stands at 4%, with 21% functionally illiterate (see figure 1). <sup>12</sup>

**350 higher education programs for inmates. In 1997, there are 8. 48**

**- 25,168 college students in correctional facilities were recipients of Pell Grants for the school year 1993-1994, the last year federal tuition support was available to them. 49 While no follow-up study has been done to track these individual students, it is highly likely that the majority of them were un-able to continue their college education.**

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The Center on Crime, Communities & Culture is a project of the Open Society Institute-New York. OSI-New York is a private operating and grantmaking foundation that promotes the development of open societies around the world both by running its own programs and by awarding grants to others. OSI-New York develops and implements a variety of domestic and international programs in the areas of educational, social, and legal reform, and encourages public debate and policy alternatives in complex and often controversial fields. OSI-New York is part of a network of more than 31 autonomous nonprofit foundations and other organizations created and funded by philanthropist George Soros in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Haiti, and South Africa, as well as in the United States. OSI New York assists these foundations by creating programs on common issues and by providing technical, administrative, and financial support.

The rate of learning disabilities in adult correctional facilities runs high, at 11%, compared to 3% in the general population. 13 Low literacy levels and high rates of learning disabilities within this population have contributed to high dropout rates. Nationwide, over 70% of all people entering state correctional facilities have not completed high school, with 46% having had some high school education and 16.4% having had no high school education at all. 14

### **Education Lowers Recidivism More Effectively than Currently Supported Programs**

Nationally, reported rates of recidivism for adult offenders in the United States are extraordinarily high, ranging from 41% 15 to 60%. 16 The difficulty in pinpointing specific rates of recidivism is often due to a confusion of terms.

The national re-arrest rate, around 63%, is different from the re-imprisonment rate, which averages around 41%.

17 Programmatic efforts to reduce recidivism have ranged from boot camps and shock incarceration facilities to prison-based education efforts. The effectiveness of these programs varies, but research shows that prison-based education and literacy programs are much more effective at lowering recidivism rates than either boot camps or shock incarceration. For example, in a recent report on crime prevention programs conducted at the request of the U.S. Justice Department, 18 researchers at the University of Maryland found that teaching reading skills to juveniles worked significantly better to reduce crime than boot camp programs. 19

“Correctional education appears to be the number one factor in reducing recidivism rates nationwide.” -- Alabama State Board of Education. 20

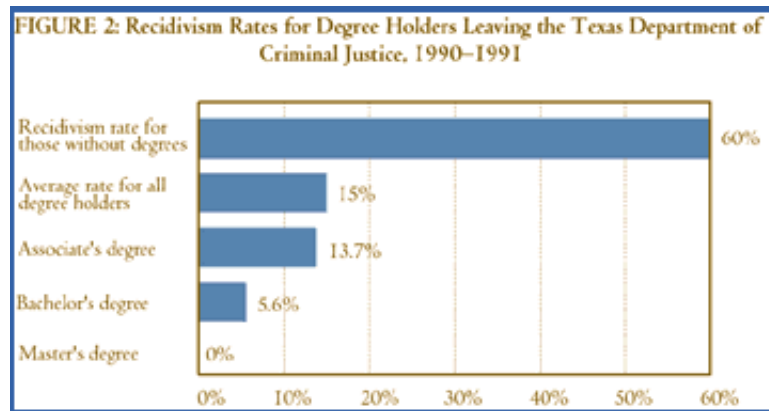
According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, there is an inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education. The more education received, the less likely an individual is to be re-arrested or re-imprisoned. 21

- A report issued by the Congressional Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency estimates that the national recidivism rate for juvenile offenders is between 60% and 84%. 22 For juveniles involved in quality reading-instruction programs,

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the recidivism rate can be reduced by 20% or more. 23

- A five-year follow-up study conducted by the Arizona Department of Adult Probation concluded that probationers who received literacy training had a significantly lower re-arrest rate (35%) than the control group (46%), and those who received GED education had a re-arrest rate of 24%, compared to the control group's rate of 46%. 24
- Inmates with at least two years of college education have a 10% re-arrest rate, compared to a national re-arrest rate of approximately 60%. 25
- Research studies conducted in Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and other states have all reported significantly low recidivism rates for inmate participants in correctional higher-education programs, ranging from 1% to 15.5%. 26, 27



As with all research on prisons and jails, data on correctional education tends to focus on specific localities or states. Texas is one jurisdiction which has done extensive research on the success of correctional higher education.

The overall recidivism rate for degree holders leaving the Texas Department of Criminal Justice between September 1990 and August 1991 was 15%, four times lower than the general recidivism rate of 60%. A two-year follow-up report found that the higher level of degree awarded was inversely related to the level of recidivism -- individuals with associate's degrees had a recidivism rate of 13.7%, those with bachelor's degrees had a rate of 5.6%, and those with master's degrees had a rate of zero (see figure 2). 28

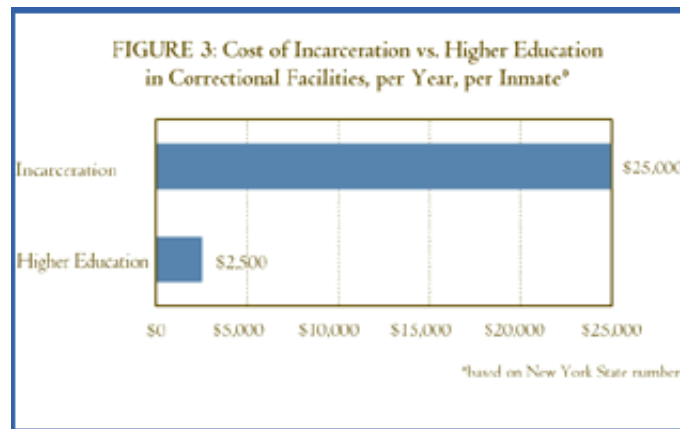
## Corrections Officials Support Correctional Education

The vast majority of corrections officials believe that educational programs not only benefit inmates, but also the facility's administration and staff. Inmate students are better behaved, less likely to engage in violence, and more likely to have a positive effect on the general prison population. 29 Educated inmates can be a "stabilizing influence in an often chaotic environment, enhancing the safety and security of all who live and work in the correctional facility." 30 Indeed, 93% of prison wardens surveyed in a 1993 study conducted by the Senate Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate strongly supported educational and vocational programming in adult correctional facilities. 31

## Correctional Higher Education Is a Bargain

The expense of providing higher education to inmates is minimal when considering the impact upon rates of recidivism and the future savings of preventing re-arrest and re-imprisonment.

New York State estimates that it costs \$2,500 per year, per individual to provide higher education in a correctional facility. In contrast, the average cost of incarcerating an adult inmate per year is \$25,000 (see figure 3). 32 Why are correctional education programs so inexpensive? For the most part, higher education in correctional facilities is provided by community colleges and universities that offer moderately priced tuition.



*"Society should recognize that the cost of college is really very insignificant when you compare the cost of the damage done by crime."* -- J. Michael Quinlin, Former Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons 33

A combination of funding sources support an inmate's



education, including in-kind donations from universities and colleges, outside support (foundations, community-based organizations, private donations), and individual contributions from inmates themselves, garnered while working at prison-based jobs. Until 1994, federal support in the form of Pell Grants did provide a substantial amount of tuition funding (see sidebar on page 8).

### **The Savings of Providing Correctional Higher Education Are Significant**

Even in a hypothetical situation with a comparatively expensive correctional higher-education program (\$2,500 per year, per inmate in New York State) and one of the highest recorded rates of recidivism upon completion of such a program (15%), the savings of providing higher education are still substantial:

The cost of incarcerating 100 individuals over 4 years is approximately \$10 million. For an additional 1/10 of that cost, or \$1 million, those same individuals could be given a full, four-year college education while incarcerated. Assuming a recidivism rate of 15% (as opposed to the general rate of 40-60%), 85 of those initial 100 individuals will not return to prison, saving U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars each year.

In addition to the millions saved by preventing an individual's return to incarceration and dependence on the criminal justice system, providing higher education to prisoners can save money in other ways. The prevention of crime helps to eliminate costs to crime victims and the courts, lost wages of the inmate while incarcerated, or costs to the inmate's family.

### **Why Should Prisoners Receive Higher Education?**

The available statistical evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates the positive impact of higher education opportunities on the prison population. Some of the resulting benefits are as follows:

- An estimated 97% of adult felony inmates are eventually discharged from confinement and released into the community. 34
- Studies have shown that individuals who receive higher education while incarcerated have a significantly better rate of employment (60--75%) than those who do not participate in college programs (40%). 35
- The financial and societal savings of providing an

inmate higher education are enormous. Upon an inmate's release, the cost-benefit of reducing recidivism will begin to be realized immediately. If we consider the additional benefit of this individual obtaining work, paying taxes, and contributing to the general economy, and the prevention of costs to victims of crime and the criminal justice system, the benefits are significantly greater.

- The RAND Corporation, a public policy think tank based in California, recently released a study showing that crime prevention is more cost-effective than building prisons. Of all crime prevention methods, education is the most cost-effective. 36
- Higher education has a stabilizing influence on the correctional environment and can help a facility to run more smoothly and less violently than correctional institutions without educational programs.
- The educational level of a parent is a clear predictor of both the educational achievements of a child and the level of parental involvement in a child's education. 37, 38 As the majority of prisoners are parents, 39 the education of adults in prison can have a positive and long-lasting impact upon the lives of their children.
- Well-run, high-quality higher education programs in correctional facilities can inspire correctional officers to pursue additional education, and in some instances scholarship moneys can be made available to those who work inside the facilities. The positive impact of education in prisons should inspire better public education for all citizens, both in and out of our prisons and jails.

## Recommendations

### ***Ensure quality education for juveniles involved in the criminal justice system.***

A child's involvement in the criminal justice system can be a critical intervention point to prevent future criminal activity. Because we do know that education can be a catalyst for change, it is essential to provide appropriate programs, including special education, to juvenile offenders. Particular attention must be paid to juveniles housed in adult correctional facilities, and programs designed to assist juveniles in their transition from incarceration into the community must be supported and



evaluated to ensure the best possible opportunities for successful reintegration upon release.

*"My involvement with college...has opened my eyes to all of the things that were wrong in my life. Now I have a sense of priority, a sense of accountability, and have made a legitimate premise for myself on which to build.... My needs are still important, but not at someone else's expense."* -- Statement by an inmate student. 40

### ***Garner financial support for correctional education programs from various sources.***

With all of the evidence available supporting the positive impact of correctional higher education, it is critical that programs be fully maintained to allow for the maximum number of qualified participants. The reinstatement of federal financial assistance in the form of Pell Grants to inmates is crucial. Alternative and varied sources of funding must also be considered. For example, in New York state, a variety of sources, including university assistance, private and in-kind donations, and the individual financial contributions of inmates and their families, have combined to provide the financial support for correctional higher-education programs.

### ***Implement and fund post-release supportive services.***

The benefit of higher education is clearly an incentive to maintain a crime-free life. However, because of the dearth of supportive services, many individuals may find themselves released without access to employment opportunities and/or additional training and education programs. As the first few months after release are critical, it is imperative that supportive services are in place and that ex-offenders are provided with access to them.

### ***Fund evaluation of educational programs.***

While it is clear that there is a strong link between quality education and lowered levels of recidivism, there are difficulties in determining exactly which types of educational programs are most effective. Public and private funders should support evaluation of correctional education programs, which would include long-term follow-up to determine the impact of programs upon employment and the chance of re-involvement in the criminal justice system for both female and male ex-offenders and their children.

If we are serious about preventing and reducing crime, it is critical to adopt the most effective, humane, and cost-efficient means of doing so. As a reasonably priced, highly efficient, and continually beneficial method of crime prevention, education is clearly one of the most successful means we have.

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