

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/back-to-school-a-common-sense-strategy-to-lower-recidivism>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The United States makes up just 5 percent of the global population but is home to [20 percent of the worlds incarcerated people](#). [More than 95 percent](#) of the 1.5 million people in U.S. prisons will eventually be released, regardless of whether they are ready to secure a job.

Thanks to evidence-based reforms, the countrys justice systems have made [marked improvements](#) in reducing recidivism rates in recent years, but [more than a third of the people](#) released from prison will find themselves back behind bars within three years. Breaking this cycle of incarceration will require lawmakers to advance program and policy changes that have been left on the table.

Few evidence-based reforms have as much untapped potential as postsecondary education in prison. Incarcerated people who participate in such programs are [48 percent less likely](#) to recidivate than those who do not. The odds of recidivism decrease as incarcerated people achieve higher levels of education. These findings are based on a comprehensive study recently updated by the RAND Corporation, which analyzed rigorous research published from 1980 through 2017.

Its time for our policymakers to act. Congress can make the largest impact by repealing the restrictions set by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which bars incarcerated people from accessing need-based Pell grants. State policymakers can also do their part by eliminating restrictions on in-state funding sources that many students in prison would otherwise be eligible for.

Removing these barriers will dramatically expand access to quality postsecondary education for people in prison, and in turn will prepare those students to secure jobs and other opportunities and help them avoid recidivating upon release. For example, a [report](#) released earlier this year by Vera and the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality found that repealing the federal ban on Pell grants for people in prison would do the following, based on 50 percent of eligible students participating:

Postsecondary education in prison as a strategy to reduce recidivism is not a new idea. Corrections and education professionals have been successfully putting these programs to the test for decades. (It also stands to reason that such programs may provide employers with a larger pool of skilled workers to hire.) Here are a few programs across the country whose outcomes speak to the transformative power of postsecondary education in prison:

California:

New York:

Oklahoma:

Oregon:

Texas:

The success of these programs present more compelling evidence that expanding access to postsecondary education is a common-sense approach with a strong track record. Repealing the Pell ban and other state-level barriers to postsecondary education without eligibility restrictions will produce the biggest benefits for the greatest number of people possible. Its time for Congress to act.

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