

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/two-societies/education-the-key-to-equality>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 1968, the [Kerner Commissions landmark report](#) acknowledged that black Americans faced persistent economic and educational barriers.

It revealed that, on average, black Americans completed fewer years of education and were twice as likely to be unemployed; if employed, they were three times more likely to be in unskilled and service jobs. The consequence of unequal educational opportunities, and therefore unequal job opportunities, meant that, [Black people earned just] 70 percent of the income earned by whites and were more than twice as likely to be living in poverty.

Today, racial inequality in education, employment, and wealth persists. In 2017, the Economic Policy Institute [reported](#) that the average wealth of black American families is a disheartening one-seventh of the average wealth of white American families. Recent [data](#) also show that even black males born to affluent families are far less likely than their white male counterparts born into affluent families to remain affluent as adults.

Rather than perpetuating educational and economic disparities for communities of color, Vera seeks to help carry out the Kerner Commissions 50-year-old proposal to [open] up opportunities to those who are restricted by racial segregation and discrimination and eliminat[e] all barriers to their choice of jobs [and] education...

Decades of discrimination, including in policing and sentencing practices, means that people of color especially black people are grossly overrepresented in American prisons, siphoned off from society and from higher education. One way the Vera Institute of Justice is working to achieve racial economic parity for the incarcerated is through its efforts to [expand access to postsecondary education](#) in prisons across the country.

Vera recently led a five-year [initiative](#) in Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina titled **Unlocking Potential: Pathways from Prior to Postsecondary Education** that provided direction, funding, and expert technical assistance to these states to build up college programs in their state prisons. Vera facilitated partnerships between departments of correction and colleges, with the goal of providing *high quality, credential- and degree-focused* postsecondary education in prisons. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for implementing successful postsecondary education programs, and Vera's partnerships provided the knowledge, tools, and best practices for each location to select what would effectively work in their individual settings.

Currently, 66 colleges and universities are providing credit-bearing college courses in over 100 prisons in 27 states through the U.S. Department of Education's [Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative](#). [Research](#) shows that providing higher education to incarcerated individuals provides an astounding 400 percent return on investment by significantly reducing recidivism. This means that educating people in prison has the power to save staggering amounts of money for the collective society. More important, increasing access to postsecondary education in prison has the power to generate financial wellbeing for marginalized individuals and families.

Expanding access to education can change how society views people with justice system involvement, changing the narrative around formerly incarcerated people. While increased access to college can improve employment prospects and lead to self-sufficiency, more significantly, it can also transform the identity of formerly incarcerated people and how they are viewed in the world.

[As stated by Fred Patrick](#), director of Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, fostering higher education in prison has proven to change the economic trajectories of entire families. Vera is actively working to be part of the solution to unjust racial disparities in education, employment, and wealth. And we will not wait another 50 years to see progress.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.