

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

Publication

California is a national leader in providing higher education to justice-involved people. A key driver of this movement has been the Renewing Communities initiative, a joint project of the Opportunity Institute and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center that sought to expand access to higher education among justice-involved people in California, both during and after incarceration. In 2016, the initiative announced a three-year partnership with seven pilot projects that provide postsecondary education and student support services in 14 public colleges and universities, housed in prisons, jails, and colleges across the state. The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted an evaluation of the Renewing Communities initiative between 2016 and 2019. The findings of Veras study, summarized here, draw on program data from, and student surveys administered at, all 14 sites. In-depth qualitative research was conducted at five of the community-based programs, housed at different colleges and universities across California.

The Renewing Communities initiative has been highly successful. More students have enrolled in the programs, and many of them have become high academic achievers. Notably, students greatly valued the staff members passion and dedication. Educational opportunities had vivid positive impacts on students identities, lives, and hopes for a brighter future.

For most incarcerated survey respondents, participation in facility-based education programs was their first time taking college-level coursework.

Community-based students reported that their programs helped them with reentry and onboarding into campus life, assisted them with personal obstacles, and increased their feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth.

Students described their programs as being safe spaces where similar experiences are shared and understood, providing them with a community of reliable and unconditionally supportive peers.

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