

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-data-second-chance-pell-continues-to-open-doors-for-more-students>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

April is Second Chance Month, and it's a time for many of us working in the criminal justice space to remind lawmakers and other decision makers of the transformative power that postsecondary education holds for people in prison. Five years ago, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell (SCP) Experimental Sites Initiative, a historic pilot program aimed at ensuring incarcerated people could access postsecondary education courses while in prison through federal Pell Grants.

Access to postsecondary education is central to our nation's founding values; it provides the opportunity to make a better life for yourself and your loved ones. That's why, for 55 years, Pell Grants have helped people with the greatest financial need access transformative postsecondary education courses. But in 1994, as part of the tough on crime era, Congress banned Pell Grants for people in federal and state prisons.

Vera provides technical assistance to the 64 colleges across 28 states participating in SCP. A new [policy brief](#) we've compiled looks at fresh data from the first three years of the initiative across 60 of the participating sites, and the findings support the [growing momentum](#) for repealing the federal ban on Pell Grants. We believe that access to college for incarcerated people is critical to advancing opportunity, improving safety both within prisons and across our communities, and strengthening families.

Vera found that participation in and degrees or accreditations earned through postsecondary education programs has risen each year since the initiative began. Nearly 17,000 students have participated in SCP since 2016, and those students have earned more than 4,500 bachelors degrees, associate degrees, postsecondary diplomas, and certificates. The data also shows that with each passing year, more students are earning credentials than the year prior.

SCP programs also prepare incarcerated people to participate fully in their communities across a multitude of trades and sectors. The 60 programs we surveyed offer 73 different types of credentialing programs, including 33 career-technical and academic certificates, 29 associate degrees, and 11 bachelors degrees.

This means that students participating in Second Chance Pell programs are learning the skills necessary to play all types of roles in their communities when they return home. For example, Milwaukee Area Technical College is offering career-specific training in areas like welding. Glenville State College in West Virginia offers an array of programs, including a bachelors degree in business administration.

The data points to undeniable momentum for postsecondary education in prison, and that is significant. When incarcerated people return home poised to contribute to their communities and less likely to recidivate, we all benefit. Those benefits are acutely important now, as policymakers look at every possible way to strengthen and protect their communities in the months and years ahead.

The growing number of people accessing postsecondary education courses while incarcerated means that prisons are safer places for incarcerated people and corrections employees alike. People who are serving long sentences are often seen as mentors to others who are incarcerated and, when these mentors participate in postsecondary education, it sets an example and a positive tone for the prison overall. As a result, we see lower instances of violence in prisons with postsecondary education programs.

Safer prisons are particularly important in moments of public health crises such as this. Reduced violence means that medical, corrections, and law enforcement resources are freed up for use where they can be most helpful.

The uptick in participation in SCP programs also translates to safer communities. That's because access to postsecondary education is never about one person. It creates a ripple effect that benefits families, communities, and collective futures. Formerly incarcerated people returning home will be well-equipped to support their communities through the technical and career-specific trainings they accessed while in prison. And they'll be less likely to recidivate. In fact, studies have [shown](#) that people who participate in postsecondary education and training programs while incarcerated are about 48 percent less likely to return to prison than people who do not. This means fewer criminal justice-related costs for communities that will undeniably be cash-strapped in the months ahead.

Perhaps most importantly, access to postsecondary education strengthens families. Children of incarcerated students are more likely to pursue their own postsecondary degrees or certificates. Children see the newfound sense of purpose, confidence, and empowerment that SCP programs provide their parents, and that makes a difference. We say that access to postsecondary education is transformative not just because it improves opportunity for one person, but because it holds the potential to shatter cycles of poverty and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Our lawmakers face a monumental task in steadying our nation and ensuring communities are resilient in the months ahead. We don't make light of the demands on the shoulders of many elected officials, but we do believe that ensuring that people returning home after incarceration are equipped with the tools to succeed is one of the many ways we can contribute to building stronger families and healthier communities. We encourage lawmakers in Congress to act to lift the ban on Pell Grants for all people in prison. In the meantime, the Vera team will continue working with committed advocates and organizations to lift up the stories of people whose lives and families have been transformed through postsecondary education.

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