

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/prison-to-college-project-helps-put-the-correction-back-in-sentencing-and-corrections>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Call me nave. When someone mentions "sentencing and corrections" a popular term in the age of mass incarceration I assume they are describing a system of justice that does what the name suggests: sentence and correct. In other words, sentencing that hold offenders accountable, and a corrections system that implements sanctions and prepares people for reintegration back into society. Without the latter, we risk perpetually cycling people in and out of the criminal justice system at great expense to families, communities, taxpayers, and ultimately, public safety.

I'm not an expert but I'm fortunate to work around many who are at the Vera Institute of Justice. From them I've learned that the United States is exceptional when it comes to incarceration. We incarcerate more people, at a higher rate, for longer periods of time than any other nation on Earth at a cost of \$52 billion annually. The return on that investment is poor. According to a 2011 Pew recidivism study, more than four in ten people are returned to prison within the first three years of release. Given this result, it is clear that new, innovative programs are needed to help those we incarcerate be more successful after their release.

A recent [article](#) in Deseret News sheds light on one such initiative: Vera's [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#) a newly launched five-year effort to test an integrated education model that begins in prison and continues in the community after release, combining access to higher education with supportive reentry services. The project aims to demonstrate that access to postsecondary education during and after prison, combined with supportive reentry services, can increase educational credentials, increase employability and earnings, and reduce recidivism. Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina are currently participating in the study, which is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates, Ford, Kellogg, Open Society, and Sunshine Lady foundations.

Pathways builds on the substantial body of empirical evidence showing that increased educational attainment is a critical factor in keeping people out of prison and helping people who were incarcerated become contributing members of families and communities. Studies suggest, for instance, that graduating from college programs can decrease recidivism by approximately 72 percent. When you consider that seventy-eight percent of the prison population lacks postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics), it's easy to see how this area is ripe for reform.

But as Pathways director, Fred Patrick explains in the Deseret News article, "There are lots of pieces that make this more comprehensive than just simply a college partnering with the prison. There will also be mentoring and tutoring initiatives, and we are asking that the states involved make sure that they have supportive parole policies in place."

The project is unique not only for its emphasis on coordination between pre- and post-release programming, but also for the partnerships that participating states are required to form with and between state and local officials, corrections and parole agencies, schools of higher education, employers, and community-based service providers.

It is widely accepted that educational attainment has beneficial effects for both individuals and society. An extensive body of literature also suggests that education is key to improving many of the long term outcomes for incarcerated people, their families, and the communities in which they live. Many who enter prison lack basic education and life skills, and large numbers face personal deficits and challenges (mental illness, addiction, anti-social attitudes, and the like) which may well be exacerbated by their time in prison. To address these issues, and to enhance public safety, reentry programs should provide a continuum of support services (access to treatment, education, and job skills) that begin at the prison door and continue as formerly incarcerated people reenter society. This would help sentencing and corrections live up to its full name and promise.

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