

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/rebuilding-lives-families-and-communities-through-education-in-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Thursday, August 22, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education announced new research findings by the RAND Corporation showing that education in prisons reduces recidivism, is cost effective, and may improve post-release employment outcomes. These findings bode well for the [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#) (Pathways Project), a five-year national demonstration effort directed by the Vera Institute of Justice, and currently operating in Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina. The Pathways Project builds partnerships among colleges, prisons, and community service providers to create a continuum of education and reentry services that begins in prison and continues in the community after release until students achieve a degree or professional certification.

RAND's [report](#), *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: a Meta-Analysis of Programs that Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*, found that inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than inmates who did not. Additionally, the odds of obtaining employment post-release among inmates who participated in correctional education was 13 percent higher than the odds for those who had not participated. Importantly, at a time of tight budgets and calls for smart investments, the findings regarding cost effectiveness are quite noteworthy. The RAND meta-analysis found that a one dollar investment in prison education reduces incarceration costs by four to five dollars during the initial three years after release when return-to-prison rates are highest. These results are immensely encouraging for the Pathways Project, which is developing a model of correctional education that seeks to improve the education levels, credential attainment, and earning potential of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people while reducing new crimes among those who participate.

The report also raised questions that the Pathways Project hopes to answer. For instance, which components of correctional education are the most crucial? With wraparound supports, including post-release counseling and other services to ease the re-entry process, can post-secondary education programs have a larger impact? How can and should correctional education programs be tailored to work successfully in different state systems?

The release of RAND's report also coincides with Attorney General Holder's remarks calling for the justice system to take bold steps to reform and strengthen America's criminal justice system in concrete and fundamental ways. As high incarceration rates take their toll on communities disproportionately affected by crime, as well as on stressed state budgets, reducing recidivism is one of the main drivers of incarceration rates and is an essential component of prison reform. The RAND study suggests that the Pathways Project will have very specific findings about promising steps to take. Most crucially, the Pathways Project creates the possibility of transforming incarceration into an experience that provides inmates with valuable and necessary tools for success post-release. In fact, with new data from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce indicating that 65 percent of job openings by 2020 will require some form of postsecondary education, the Pathways Project is a timely and worthwhile effort that we hope will spur additional interest and investment in higher education in prison as a smart-on-crime, evidence-based strategy that transforms lives, strengthens families, addresses workforce needs, reduces correctional costs, and rebuilds communities.

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