

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/target-2020/postsecondary-education-in-prison-is-a-racial-equity-strategy>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The recent protests against police violence have led to calls to divest from law enforcement and invest in communities of color. At the same time, college students across the country are grappling with how to safely pursue their education and what the implications are for their careers and their future earning if they do not continue their course of study. Because our criminal legal system disproportionately harms Black and Latinx people, reinstating access to Pell Grants for all eligible incarcerated students must be a part of this national conversation, as a strategy to address and correct an unjust policy that is perpetuating racial inequities.

Consider who is most impacted by mass incarceration: Black people [make up 13 percent](#) of the country's population, but more than [one-third](#) of people in prison. Latinx people constitute [18.5 percent](#) of the country's population, but account for [23.4 percent](#) of people in prison. Currently, [one in three](#) Black men without a high school diploma or GED will end up incarcerated, but only one in eight white men.

At the same time, [more than half of people in prison](#) are academically eligible to enroll in postsecondary courses. But the ban on Pell Grants often prevents them from doing so.

Understanding the transformative power of postsecondary education in prison, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) launched the **Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (Second Chance Pell)** in 2015. Second Chance Pell allows incarcerated students to access Pell Grants to participate in high-quality postsecondary education programs, and it's proven so successful that ED expanded the initiative earlier this spring. The program now includes 130 colleges and universities operating in prisons across 42 states. The results are powerful. [According to our data](#), more than 17,000 students have participated in Second Chance Pell, earning more than 4,500 bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and career-specific certificates or diplomas. The data also shows that with each passing year, more students are earning credentials than the year before.

Interest in earning a degree or accreditation through Second Chance Pell is [particularly high among eligible Black students](#). Among the thousands of current Second Chance Pell participants, the percentage of Black students (30 percent) is more than twice that found on college campuses (14 percent). What's more, incarcerated Black students are enrolling in Second Chance Pell colleges in proportions roughly equivalent to their representation in the national prison population (30 percent vs. 33 percent).

Lifting the ban on Pell creates opportunity for incarcerated people, their families, and the communities to which they return home. The benefits of college-in-prison programs are numerous: lowered recidivism rates, increased employment post-release, higher wages earned, stronger families, tax savings that could be otherwise invested, and safer prisons. It's a move that would also allow the [combined wages earned](#) by all formerly incarcerated people to increase by about \$45.3 million during their first year of release. Our institutions have, for centuries, excluded or made it difficult for Black people to build wealth; lifting the ban on Pell is one way to chip away at these disparities. Moreover, people who participate in postsecondary education programs while incarcerated are [48 percent less likely to recidivate](#) than those who do not.

The Pell ban is currently one of the most significant barriers to reentry for people in prison. Expanding access to college programs in prisons is an effective and evidence-based way to shatter many of the inequities and obstacles associated with reentry that Black and brown communities face. The evidence is clear. Now is the time for Congress to do its part to make expanded access to postsecondary education permanent by lifting the Pell Grant ban once and for all. People in prison have been waiting for this unjust law to be reversed since 1994, and they cannot wait any longer.

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