



“Prison education is a means of rehabilitating and re-directing. If you release someone with the same skills with which she came in, she’s going to get involved in the same activities as she did before.”

– Marymount Bedford Hills Program student

The Higher the Degree, the Lower the Recidivism Rate

Studies conducted over the last two decades almost unanimously indicate that higher education in prison programs **reduces recidivism** and translates into reductions in crime, **savings to taxpayers**, and long-term contributions to the **safety and well-being** of the communities to which formerly incarcerated people return.

Recent research on prison education programs presents discouraging statistics on the current recidivism rate. The **Institute**

for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) reported in 2011 that nearly 7 in 10 people who are formerly incarcerated will commit a new crime, and half will end up back in prison within three years. Given that about 95 out of every 100 incarcerated people eventually rejoin society,[1] it is crucial that we develop programs and tools to effectively reduce recidivism.

Prison education is far more effective at reducing recidivism than boot camps, “shock” incarceration or vocational training, according to the National Institute of Justice.[2] In 2001, the Correctional Education Association’s “Three State Recidivism Study” quantified this reduction, demonstrating that correctional education lowered long-term recidivism by 29 percent.[3]

A 2005 IHEP report cites yet higher numbers, reporting that recidivism rates for incarcerated people who had participated in prison education programs were on average 46 percent lower than the rates of incarcerated people who had not taken college classes. The same report examined 15 different studies conducted during the 1990s and found that 14 of these showed reduced long-term recidivism rates among people who had participated in postsecondary correctional education.[4]

The vast majority of people in U.S. prisons do not have a high school diploma. A high correlation exists between the level of education attained by an incarcerated person and his or her recidivism rate. The American Correctional Association has reported that in Indiana the recidivism rate for GED completers is 20 percent lower than the general prison population's rate, and the recidivism rate for college degree completers is 44 percent lower than the general population's.^[5] In other words, the higher the degree earned, the lower the recidivism rate.

Increased Employment, Reduced Recidivism

This inverse relationship between degree level and recidivism rate is not surprising. According to a 2009 report from the Correctional Association of New York, a college education has become one of the most valuable assets in the United States; a bachelor's degree is worth more than \$1 million in lifetime earnings.^[6] Thus the presence (or absence) of a degree has far-reaching implications for the employment opportunities available to formerly incarcerated people reintegrating into society. Gainful employment is one of the defining characteristics of successful reentry, and successful reentry and readjustment into society ultimately lower the likelihood of an

individual reverting back to illegal activity.

“College education helps one to get a job and therefore transition more easily to the outside.” – Marymount Bedford Hills Program student

Today, an estimated 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States. Taken together, states spend over \$52 billion annually on corrections and related activities.^[7]

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the average annual operating cost per incarcerated person in 2001 was \$22, 650.^[8] The annual spending per student for a standard state university such as the State University of New York (SUNY) is below \$8, 000.^[9] In short, there is a significant cost difference between corrections and education spending.

Currently, only approximately 6 percent of corrections spending is being used to pay for all prison programming, including educational programs. A 50-state analysis of postsecondary prison education concludes that “even if educational programs are expanded, their per-prisoner cost is far less than the total cost of incarceration.”^[10]

Long-Term Cost-Efficiency: Recidivism’s Cost-Cutting Effects

The high cost of correctional spending is exacerbated by an astonishingly high national recidivism rate of 67.5 percent,^[11] which significantly contributes to the increasing prison population. By reducing recidivism, prison education has the far-reaching potential of reducing the entire scale of the prison population and, thus, prison costs.

A study by the Department of Policy Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles found that “a \$1 million investment in incarceration will prevent about 350 crimes, while that same investment in [correctional] education will prevent more than 600 crimes. Correctional education is almost twice as cost effective as incarceration.”^[12] Post-secondary education also yields multiple public benefits, including greater societal productivity, increased tax revenue and decreased reliance on governmental support.^[13] In a 2005 IHEP survey, more people with a high school diploma reported receiving public assistance in every state than did those with a bachelor’s degree, and in 28 states no one with a bachelor’s degree reported receiving public assistance in the prior year.^[14] “Prison higher education programs can be a cost-effective investment of taxpayer dollars.”^[15]

Violence Reduction

Directors of prison education programs often report noticeable improvement in general prison conduct and discipline. One director in New York state noted that disciplinary infractions declined among his students during the course of a semester; another described how incarcerated students policed themselves out of fear of permanently losing their prison education program. A 2009 report concludes that “changes in behavior can be attributed to improved cognitive capacity as well as to the incarcerated person having the opportunity to feel human again by engaging in an activity as commonplace as going to classes.”^[16]

“ *“It occurred to me that at San Quentin the power of education had actually changed the culture within the prison. This is unheard of anywhere else in the California prison system.” – Chrisfino Kenyatta Leal, 2011 valedictorian of the Prison University Project*

Survey results from an Indiana prison in the 1990s showed that incarcerated people who were enrolled in college classes committed 75 percent fewer infractions than incarcerated people who were not enrolled. A more recent study demonstrates that postsecondary correctional education programs can break down the racial barriers

that are a common cause of disciplinary problems in the prison setting.^[17]

The Correctional Association of New York finds that “the prison officials have often recommended reinstating college programs because of their multiple benign effects: providing an incentive for good behavior; producing mature, well-spoken leaders who have a calming influence on other [incarcerated people] and on correction officers; and communicating the message that society has sufficient respect for the human potential of incarcerated people.” ^[18]

Positive Effects on Children Whose Parents Are Incarcerated

“ *“I believe education can mean the difference between a life of crime and a productive life. My educational level can influence whether my twin sons aspire to be criminals or whether they have the self confidence to pursue occupations that challenge their minds.” – Gregory Brown, Hudson Link student*

The number of children affected by their parents’ incarceration is significant: In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than

half of all people behind bars had minor children at the time of their incarceration. Most incarcerated parents had lived with their children prior to incarceration and expected to be reunited with them upon release. A college education has far-reaching capacity to set a good example for these children. A study of the Bedford Hills College Program found that children of the women enrolled in the prison college program expressed pride in their mothers' academic achievements, were inspired to take their own education more seriously and were more motivated to attend college themselves.^[19]

Moreover, many studies demonstrate that postsecondary prison education programs offer a chance to break the intergenerational cycle of inequality. When children are inspired by their parents to take education more seriously, they too begin to see viable alternatives to dropping out of school and entering a life of crime, thus breaking a harrowing cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

“ *The more opportunities we in prison have to learn to value education and see possibilities for ourselves, the greater the chance we will break the cycle of incarceration not just for ourselves but for future generations to come.*” – Chrisfino Kenyatta Leal, 2011 valedictorian of the Prison University Project

- [1] Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler, “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011
- [2] Lawrence W. Sherman et. al, “Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn’t, What’s Promising,” National Institute of Justice, 1998
- [3] Stephen Steurer, Linda Smith, and Alice Tracy, “Three State Recidivism Study,” Correctional Education Association, 2001
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- [5] Stephen Steurer, John Linton, John Nally, and Susan Lockwood, “The Top-Nine Reasons to Increase Correctional Education Programs,” *Corrections Today*, 2010.
- [6] Correctional Association of New York, “Education from the Inside Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison,”

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[7] Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler, “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011.

[8] James J. Stephen, “State Prison Expenditures 2001.” Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001.

[9] Correctional Association of New York, “Education from the Inside Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison,” 2009.

[10] Wendy Erisman and Jeanne Bayer Contardo, “Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005.

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[13] Institute for Higher Education Policy, “The Investment Payoff,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005.

[14] Wendy Erisman and Jeanne Bayer Contardo, “Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Correctional Association of New York, “Education from the Inside Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison,” 2009.

[17] Wendy Erisman and Jeanne Bayer Contardo, “Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy,” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005.

[18] Correctional Association of New York, “Education from the Inside Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison,”

2009.

[19] Wendy Erisman and Jeanne Bayer Contardo, “[Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy](#),” Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005

