

Education linked to better employment prospects upon release from prison

November 20 2023, by Ben Stickle and Steven Sprick Schuster



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Better job prospects. Higher wages. A greater chance of staying out of jail. Those are the key outcomes that we discovered for incarcerated people who get an education while serving their time.

Our [findings were published](#) in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

They are based on an analysis of research studies on the effects of [prison education](#) in the U.S. We examined a range of programs, from adult basic education to college. We analyzed 152 [data points](#) from 79 research papers published between 1980 and 2023.

Specifically, our analysis found:

- **Reduced recidivism:** Participating in prison education decreases the chances of recidivism by 6.7 percentage points—from 46% to 39.3%.

This translates to safer communities and significant savings for the state. The [average prisoner](#) in the U.S. spends nearly three years in prison, at a total cost of US\$107,000.

Education programs in prisons not only decrease the likelihood that released prisoners commit future crimes and victimize more people and communities, but they also reduce the likelihood of future incarceration costs.

- **Improved employment prospects:** Inmates who participated in educational programs had a 3.1 percentage point higher likelihood of securing employment after release than inmates who did not participate in programs—from 44.8% to 47.9%. In a society where ex-inmates often find [doors closed because of their past](#), this increase in employability is crucial for released prisoners' successful reintegration.
- **Increased earnings:** Educated prisoners are not only more likely to find work but also more likely to find higher-paying jobs. Education increases the yearly wages of employed ex-offenders by \$564. Though modest, the benefit is considerable when calculated over years.

While all forms of education yielded benefits, college programs, despite their higher costs, had the most profound impact on inmates with higher earnings and rates of employment. Most college programs are two to four years—representing a more intensive investment—but also a more transformative impact.

The [economic strain](#) of maintaining a vast prison population is already immense.

Our study finds that each dollar spent on all four major forms of education—adult basic education, secondary, vocational, and college—[more than pays for itself](#). The return on investment for prison programs varies from 61.15% for college to 205.13% for vocational coursework.

While our study considers only the measurable factors of incarceration and employment, many [other benefits](#) of decreased crime cannot be easily measured. These benefits include reduced costs to victims, courts, and police. Fully including these benefits will only increase the return on investment.

The [recent restoration of Pell Grants for incarcerated students](#)—eliminated in 1994 during the "[tough-on-crime](#)" era—is a testament to the growing acknowledgment of the importance of prison education. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has reintroduced [Second Chance Pell programs](#), with promising results in the form of [graduation and job offers](#).

The [research team](#), with support from the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), a Michigan-based nonprofit think tank that promotes [free markets](#) and limited government, continues to dive deeper into this topic, evaluating how states can encourage prison education. We are also keen to study how the expanded access to Pell Grants might further influence

the effectiveness and reach of prison [education programs](#). But more questions remain: How will these programs evolve with increased funding? Will the positive effect of education continue as these programs reach more incarcerated students?

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