



Policy Brief:

Post- Secondary Prison Education Programs

Human Trafficking Search 2021

A Project of the O.L. Pathy Family
Foundation

Written by Gina Hinojosa

People with a criminal record face substantial barriers to fair employment both while in prison and after release. Given that the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution allows for forced labor as a punishment of crime, most people in custody are [required](#) to participate in prison work programs that often verge on enslavement. Most incarcerated people take away only pennies an hour for their labor and face reprisals like solitary confinement and other harsh punishments for refusing to work. In three states—Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas—incarcerated workers are paid nothing at all for their labor. In two others—Florida and Alabama—they are paid nothing for work that keeps the prison running.

Proponents of prison work programs argue that they provide an avenue for incarcerated individuals to use their time productively and develop work skills useful for reentry into the community. While research does show that many people in custody have unstable work histories and could therefore benefit from employment opportunities while incarcerated, [research has shown](#) that traditional prison work programs have little effect on post-release outcomes. The vast majority of prisoners—around 74 percent—are tasked with [institutional maintenance](#) jobs, like laundering uniforms and bed linens, mowing lawns, and staffing kitchens—tasks that typically do not foster transferable skills useful for the job market on the outside.

This lack of workforce preparation, along with the stigmas and discrimination that people with a criminal record face in the labor market, helps to explain why the over 600,000 people that transition from prisons back into their communities each year struggle to find employment. The unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated individuals sits at a staggering [27 percent](#)—higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression. [Only 55 percent](#) of those previously incarcerated make any income in the first year after their release. Those who do land jobs often earn incomes that put them well below the poverty line: [median annual earnings](#) in the first year after release hover around \$10,000, while only 20 percent of previously incarcerated people earn more than \$15,000. Even five years post-release, 67 percent of the formerly incarcerated remain either unemployed or underemployed.

The difficulties formerly incarcerated individuals face in the labor market can make them more vulnerable to workplace abuse once they find a job. “Employers know it’s hard for those with a criminal record to find a job,” [says Robynn Cox](#), Assistant Professor at the [USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work](#). “This can create an unfair power dynamic, in which the employer may feel empowered to exploit them in the workplace or engage in illegal practices such as wage theft.”



A primary way to help people with a criminal record achieve fair employment is by expanding reentry-focused education and training initiatives in prison, and prioritizing this programming over traditional prison work programs. This brief highlights some of the most innovative opportunities in correctional education and employment, and provides proposals for how to expand access to these programs. Each of these initiatives prepares students for the labor market by pairing classroom instruction with on-the-job training and working closely with employers in the community to address stigmas and misconceptions about the incarcerated population. These types of programs are a much more humane and productive use of incarcerated people's time than forcing them to participate in work programs that pay little to nothing and offer little opportunity for social mobility.

BENEFITS OF ROBUST EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS IN PRISON

A key factor complicating reentry is that, on average, people entering prison are far less educated than the general population. Around [one-third](#) of federal and state prisoners do not have a high school diploma or GED, compared to 19 percent of the unincarcerated population. Meanwhile, [96 percent](#) of incarcerated individuals lack a postsecondary degree, while the same holds true for only 29 percent of the general population. This makes returning citizens less competitive in the labor market, given that nearly [two-thirds](#) of all jobs in the United States require a postsecondary education in some form.

These trends suggest that working towards a postsecondary degree while in prison can help reduce barriers to fair employment upon reentry into society. A Rand Corporation [meta-analysis](#) examining the association between correctional education, employment after release, and recidivism rates found that those who engage in educational opportunities in prison are 13 percent more likely to find employment post-release compared to those who do not. The study also found that as people leaving prison find stable, well-paying jobs, they become 43 percent less likely to commit new crimes and reenter the prison system.

Reduced recidivism saves taxpayers millions of dollars that would have otherwise been spent on incarceration, pointing to strong returns on investment for federal and state governments that prioritize funding for correctional education. Indeed, providing postsecondary education programs in prisons yields a [\\$5 return on investment](#) for every dollar spent on postsecondary education over three years due to decreased recidivism and increased employment and stability among returning citizens. State-level cost

savings alone total around [\\$365.8 million each year](#), an average of \$7.6 million per state.

[Data also show](#) that correctional education reduces idleness and fosters a sense of purpose and rehabilitation among people in custody, in turn reducing violence and misconduct behind prison walls. Student testimony also speaks to these benefits: one student participating in a postsecondary program supported by the Vera Institute of Justice's Pathways Program [says](#), "People were challenging each other in the way that allowed you to properly, you know, go against the guy next to you without posturing or making it physical. You would challenge each other based on facts and not assumptions." Another student [says](#), "[The program]...made me feel I guess in a sense human again, while I was in such an inhumane place...[It] is mind-blowing for me to be able to say that although I made a mistake, I was still in a position to better myself."

Innovative Approach: Washington State's I-BEST Model

While departments of corrections at the federal and state level typically offer GED programming for all incarcerated individuals who lack a high school diploma, evidence suggests that further educational training is needed to have a meaningful impact on people's ability to support themselves and their families post-release. In a [study of Minnesota prisoners](#), for example, researchers found that completing a high school equivalency program increased the odds of securing post-release employment, but had no effect on hours worked or wages earned. Earning a postsecondary degree, on the other hand, was associated with full-time work and higher total wages.

One way to help move students with low basic skills competency further and faster along in their college and career pathway is to pair adult basic education with on-the-job training in an in-demand industry. Washington State is recognized nationally as a leader in this approach. Washington pioneered the [Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training \(I-BEST\)](#) model, which offers adult basic education in reading, writing, math, and spoken English, while simultaneously training incarcerated individuals for a vocational trade of their choice. A long and vibrant relationship between the Washington Department of Corrections, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), and Washington's community and technical colleges allows I-BEST students to obtain certificates in areas such as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning; carpentry; and collision repair.

Another important and innovative aspect of Washington's correctional education model is that it pairs students with "reentry navigators" that act as college advisors both in prison and in the community. In prison, navigators help incarcerated individuals apply



for college and financial aid prior to release. On the outside, navigators work to create a seamless pathway from prison to postsecondary education in the community. The Washington Department of Corrections has made this possible by establishing contracts with community colleges in the seven counties with the highest population of formerly incarcerated individuals.

The reentry navigator program is paid for through the \$18 million funding package the Washington legislature appropriates to SBCTC for correctional education each year. This demonstrates the state leadership's commitment to building a correctional education model that focuses on reentry from the time someone enters prison to the time they finish their postsecondary degree and beyond.

Innovative Approach: Michigan's Vocational Villages Program

For incarcerated students with basic skills competency, jumping straight into a vocational training or apprenticeship program may be in their best interest. The Michigan Department of Corrections offers one of the most innovative vocational training models in the country. Its [Vocational Village](#) program [partners with](#) Michigan Works! Agencies and the state's Talent Investment Agency to design training programs that meet labor market needs in the counties that incarcerated students most frequently return to after release. The program offers training in 10 vocational trades that range from automotive technology to robotics and computer coding, and awards nationally recognized certificates upon completion.

Vocational Village participants are all housed together in one unit, which students say offers a therapeutic learning environment and a sense of educational community. Students spend a full day in the classroom and in the shop learning and perfecting their trade, and when their shift is over, they return to their housing unit to participate in communal cognitive programming. The Michigan Department of Corrections actively engages with the business community, frequently inviting employers to visit the Vocational Village unit and meet students to help break down misconceptions about the incarcerated population and help students secure a job prior to release. About [95 percent](#) of everyone who has graduated from the Vocational Village program had a job offer in hand before leaving prison.

Innovative Approach: Iowa's Focus on Department of Labor Apprenticeships

The U.S. Department of Labor offers registered apprenticeship training programs that typically consist of 2,000 hours of on-the-job training along with a recommended



minimum of 144 hours of classroom instruction annually. These apprenticeships [are associated with](#) a 91 percent post-completion employment rate and an average annual starting wage of \$50,000, pointing to strong potential benefits for incarcerated individuals who complete the program.

Since 2006, the Indiana Department of Corrections has partnered with the U.S. Department of Labor to offer [registered apprenticeship programs](#) that meet the state's workforce needs. Indiana has the largest prison apprenticeship training program in the nation, with over 2,600 incarcerated individuals completing the program annually. Over 75 percent of those who complete a prison apprenticeship in Indiana obtain employment within 150 days of release. Some apprentices work in joint ventures with private industries that pay incarcerated workers comparable wages to private sector workers performing the same work, although corrections agencies [may take](#) a significant portion of wages.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Demand for correctional education and training opportunities far exceeds the amount of programming that current funding streams can support. According to the most recent [U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults](#), over 70 percent of incarcerated people want to participate in some sort of formal education in prison, yet only 21 percent have a spot in a certification or degree program. This points to the urgent need for additional funding streams to help bring programming up to scale with demand.

One of the most important ways to expand access to these programs is to eliminate the barriers that people with a criminal record face in accessing state financial aid. Two-thirds of all U.S. states currently have some sort of statutory, regulatory, or policy barrier that prevents currently or formerly incarcerated individuals from accessing at least one state financial aid program. The only [17 states](#) that do not have barriers are Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Some states permanently bar anyone with a felony conviction from ever receiving financial aid, severely hindering their access to higher education.

Another way states can bring correctional education up to scale is by making full use of the federal funding available to them. The [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#), which supports state-level workforce development efforts, allows states to use up to 20 percent of WIOA funds toward correctional education. In addition, states are allowed to use up to 2 percent of the federal funds they receive from the [Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act](#) toward incarcerated individuals. However, only 13



states leverage these two funding streams to broaden access to correctional education—Alabama, California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Texas, and Wisconsin.

An additional form of federal support is the [Second Chance Pell Pilot Program](#). In 2015, the federal government created the program to give eligible colleges and universities the funds needed to deliver programming in correctional facilities. Colleges and universities apply for the grants and the U.S. Department of Education selects those determined to be the most qualified. In April 2020, the Department of Education doubled the size of the Second Chance Pell Program, allowing 130 schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia to deliver correctional education programming. Calls to further expand the program argue that these grants are the best way to ensure incarcerated students with limited financial means can participate in higher education.

Innovative Approach: Wisconsin’s Reentry-Focused Funding Strategy

In addition to leveraging federal funding and eliminating barriers to state financial aid, Wisconsin has gone a step further to expand access to correctional education. Since 2009, a statute called the [Becky Young Community Corrections Recidivism Reduction Appropriation](#) sets aside funds designated specifically for reentry-focused education programming. The Wisconsin Department of Corrections has requested over \$11.5 million of these funds for its [2019-2021 programming](#) to support evidence-based reentry strategies. This includes partnering with local technical colleges to deliver vocational training in high-demand fields, as well as working with each of Wisconsin’s 11 Workforce Development Boards to provide a [“Window to Work Program”](#) that helps prepare returning individuals for success in their communities upon release. In addition, the state’s [Talent Incentive Program Grant](#), which assists low-income students with college costs, has a particular focus on non-traditional students, including those who are currently or formerly incarcerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Expand reentry-focused education and training programs

The evidence makes clear that expanding reentry-focused correctional education and training programs is one of the best ways to help people with a criminal record find well-paying, stable employment upon reentry into society. In order for these programs to be successful, they must be well-funded, have a strong focus on developing in-demand



skills that meet the needs of the labor market, connect students to local employers, and provide continuous reentry services that create a seamless pathway from prison into the community.

Relieve students from work requirements

[Only 11 states](#) release people in custody from their work requirements if they are participating in an educational program. This means that even if states increase funding for correctional education, participating students still may not succeed because they don't have the time needed to dedicate to their studies. More states should release incarcerated students from forced labor requirements in order to help guarantee their academic success.

Raise labor program wages

While some apprenticeship programs pay incarcerated apprentices at least minimum wage for their labor, most do not. Helping people with a criminal record achieve fair employment must start in prison, and it should include raising wages for apprenticeships and other employment programs. The most obvious way to achieve this is to amend the Constitution to disallow unpaid labor in prisons, but perhaps a more feasible solution is for policymakers to raise prison wages and labor standards through state and federal legislation.

Expand fair chance hiring practices

It must be emphasized that expanding access to reentry-focused programs in prisons cannot fully eliminate the barriers that people with a criminal record face in the labor market. Additional reforms are urgently needed. This includes expanding fair chance hiring practices and passing "ban-the-box" ordinances that require employers to eliminate job application questions that ask about an applicant's criminal history.