

In Consideration of Reinstating Pell for Incarcerated Students: Executive Summary

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Data about the epidemic of mass incarceration, the collateral consequences of conviction, and the civil rights implications of their related trends are widely known.

- Black citizens are incarcerated at rates almost seven times higher than that of White citizens and a little over two times higher than that of Latinx citizens (Prison Policy Initiative, 2012)
- Substantial education attainment gaps exist between the incarcerated population and the average US Household (PIAAC 2014)
- Noteworthy income level stratification has been identified between pre-incarceration income of those in custody and income within the average (read: nonincarcerated) US Household (Rabuy and Kopf 2015)

The current political climate has seen more attention paid to the issues surrounding mass incarceration, with bipartisan recognition that providing education programs inside correctional facilities is beneficial for the individual and society. Research has found that education and post-release outcomes are often closely correlated but it has also indicated that the racial disparities reflected in the demographics of the incarcerated population may also impact outcomes (Clear, 2007; Freeman, 1992; Pager, 2003; Pager, 2007).

To examine and better understand the impact of educational access on post-release outcomes, the Second Chance Pell Experiment began in Fall 2016, allowing Pell access for up to 12,000 persons in carceral custody. The importance of this experiment cannot be overstated.

- While Pell had been available to incarcerated persons from the program's onset, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCA) of 1994, 108 Stat. 1796 banned its use by those in federal and state correctional facilities
- It is estimated that prior to the ban for confined learners, at least 300 higher education programs were operating inside prisons

Results from the experiment, particularly around credential completion and some post-release employment outcomes, have been positive.

- By the conclusion of Fall 2017, student enrollment had increased 231% since the beginning of the experiment and the number of courses offered had increased 124%
- In terms of completion metrics, 954 postsecondary credentials have been awarded since the start of the experiment; 701 are certificates, 230 are associate's, and 23 are bachelor's degrees

The success of the experiment, particularly amid conversations around Higher Education Act reauthorization, prompt practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to consider the potential impact of reinstating Pell access for incarcerated students, writ large. Questions remain about the extent to which reinstating Pell for incarcerated students can help to address, and perhaps ultimately narrow, educational attainment and employment gaps. Traditional examinations of attainment equity include conversations around disparities within and among gender identities, race/ethnic delineators, and socioeconomic strata; these examinations, however, implicitly assume that the students in question are not incarcerated. Further research is needed to recontextualize these equity conversations and critically understand both practice and policy implications associated with the reopening of Title IV funding for this population.