

Executive Summary:

The Impacts of College- in-Prison Participation on Safety and Employment in New York State

Educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals have been historically limited, yet they offer a promising avenue towards rehabilitation, public safety, and long-term economic benefits.

Introduction

Despite the high demand for education among the incarcerated population and the benefits to students who are incarcerated, their families and communities, public safety, and safety inside prisons, there has been limited capacity to meet these needs.¹ Pell Grants and the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which were key sources of funding for postsecondary education in prisons in New York State, were removed for incarcerated individuals in 1994, causing the number of college-in-prison programs to drop drastically, not only in New York but nationally.² While some institutions in New York were able to secure resources from private foundations, these funds were not sufficient to fill the gap left by the lost funding. Consequently, only a third of incarcerated individuals in New York who apply for college are admitted, primarily due to the funding deficit.³

A meta-analysis found that correctional education for incarcerated individuals reduces recidivism by 28 percent. For those pursuing postsecondary education, recidivism is reduced by 48 percent.

Postsecondary education for incarcerated individuals brings benefits such as reduced prison misconduct, lower recidivism, improved employment rates, and public safety enhancements. A recent meta-analysis by Robert Bozick and his colleagues, which rigorously assessed study quality, found that correctional education reduced reincarceration odds by 28 percent, with postsecondary education specifically reducing it by 48 percent.⁴ This meta-analysis also indicated a 27 percent higher odds of securing post-release employment for prison education participants, although this was not statistically significant.⁵ Few high-quality studies have investigated the effect of postsecondary education in prison on in-facility behavior and wages.⁶ Those that exist suggest education reduces in-facility misconducts and increases total income among those who are employed post-release.⁷

The Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) funded by the Manhattan District Attorney expanded postsecondary education for incarcerated individuals through the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP). CIP increased the number of programs and the capacity of existing programs. This report details an impact evaluation of participation in academic associate's and bachelor's degree programs offered by seven colleges participating in CIP. It focuses on the effects of participation in college in prison on in-facility behavior, recidivism, employment, and income after release.

Vera researchers additionally present a cost analysis which breaks down the costs associated with current program delivery as well as the potential expansion of existing programs. This provides a first step into a cost benefit analysis of college education for individuals in prisons, allowing us to better understand the potential return on investment of such initiatives.

College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative

The College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP), a five-year project funded from 2017 to 2023, was part of the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) undertaken by the Manhattan District Attorney.⁸ CJII aimed to reinvest \$250 million in criminal asset forfeiture into public safety initiatives. Over this six-year span, a significant aspect of the initiative involved expanding college education in prisons across New York State.

Eligibility for college funding through CJII included criteria based on the following:

- **time to release**
Individuals had to be between one-and-a-half to five-and-a-half years from release at the time of initial enrollment;
- **educational attainment**
Individuals needed to have completed a high school degree or equivalency, but not yet obtained a college degree; and
- **history of in-facility sanctions**
Individuals had to be free of any Tier II misconduct (intermediate-level rule violation) in the past six months, or a Tier III misconduct (most severe level rule violation) in the past 12 months.

The College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP) aimed to expand the capacity of existing college programs and initiate new ones. With CIP’s support, the capacity for college enrollment increased across New York’s correctional facilities.

Seven colleges and universities participated in CIP: Bard College, Cornell University, Medaille College, Mercy College, Mohawk Valley Community College, New York University, and SUNY Jefferson. They offered various degree programs across multiple correctional facilities, including both facilities designated for men and for women. Two organizations, the Institute for Justice and Opportunity at John Jay College and the State University of New York, received funding under CJII to provide technical assistance.

Table 1

Participating colleges and universities: Programs and prison locations

College	Programs Offered	Prison Facilities (Security Level, Gender Designation)
Bard College	AA, BA, PH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taconic (Medium, women) • Woodbourne, Fishkill, Eastern NY (Medium, men) • Coxsackie, Green Haven (Maximum, men)
Cornell University	AA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cayuga (Medium, men) • Auburn, Elmira, Five Points (Maximum, men)
Medaille College	AA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Albion (Medium, women)
Mercy College	BS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sing Sing (Maximum, men)
MVCC	AA, AS, AAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marcy (Medium, men)
NYU	AA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wallkill (Medium, men)
SUNY Jefferson	AA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cape Vincent, Gouverneur, Watertown (Medium, men)

Methods

Data

Data for this report was provided by the seven college providers, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), and the New York State Department of Labor (DOL). The data included information on CJII-funded students and comparable non-students, covering their incarceration period, eligibility for CJII-funded education, employment and wages, and criminal legal system history.

The following outcomes were examined for students and non-students:

- **in-facility behavior**

Measured by misconducts following the start of their college education or eligibility for college education funded by CJII. Data included only in-facility convictions of misconduct filings by corrections staff. These data were provided by DOCCS;

- **new criminal legal system involvement (often called “recidivism”)**

Measured as a new conviction within six months, 12 months, and any time after release from incarceration. Notably, new arrests not leading to new convictions during the study period and new incarcerations resulting from technical violations were not included in the measure. These data were provided by DCJS; and

- **employment status and income after release from incarceration**

Measured as formal employment and reported wages in occupations that qualify for unemployment insurance. Individuals were considered employed if they were not incarcerated and earned wages in a quarter. Those released from incarceration without wage data were assigned a wage of zero if they were living in the community, to minimize bias. These data came from unemployment insurance data provided by DOL.

Analyses

Propensity score matching was used to create more comparable groups of students and eligible non-students. Non-students were deemed eligible for comparison if they met similar academic, behavioral, and time-to-release requirements as students, and if they were medically and psychiatrically capable of participating in college education. More specifically, students and non-students were matched on the following variables: demographics, conviction history, correctional characteristics, and educational characteristics. These variables were chosen based on their influence on participation in prison college education or on the outcome measures of interest, including prison misconducts, new convictions after release, formal employment, and reported wages.

Regression analysis is a statistical method used to estimate the difference between groups participating in an intervention versus those not participating, while accounting for other influencing factors. Propensity score matching is often combined with regression analysis to improve the robustness of the estimates of effect. In the current study, Vera used logistic regression to analyze formal employment status and incidents leading to a new conviction within six and 12 months of release. Vera researchers used survival analysis to estimate the impact of the program on the time until an incident that leads to a new criminal conviction occurs after release. Finally, Vera researchers used linear regression to examine the effect of college education in prison on misconducts and on reported wages. All regression analysis were performed on the matched sample.

This executive summary presents initial findings with a final report forthcoming. The final report will replicate, refine, and extend the analyses of in-facility behavior and post-release recidivism, employment, and wages. This follow-up analysis will use additional variables, an extended time frame to follow students who enrolled early on in CIP and matched non-students, and an expanded the sample to include people who started or became eligible to start college education funded by CJII following the publication of this report.

Summary of Key Findings

Reconviction

Vera researchers found that participation in prison-based college education significantly reduced the risk of reconviction for a new offense by at least 66 percent. This reduction remained consistent across all three time periods analyzed (six months, one year, and at any point after release). Most new convictions within the sample occurred within six months of release, supporting previous findings that reconvictions tend to occur sooner rather than later following release.⁹

Misconducts

When comparing students and matched non-students, Vera found no statistically significant differences in misconduct counts between students and non-students in prison education programs, which is contrary to most existing literature. The eligibility rules for participation in prison education under CJII included having no recent Tier II or Tier III misconducts (no Tier II misconducts within the past six months and no Tier III misconducts within the past 12 months). It may be that due to the eligibility rules for participation in college education in prison that students and non-students eligible for college already had so few misconducts that there was limited scope for further reductions in either group. Other studies of misconducts were conducted in other contexts where eligibility for postsecondary education does not depend as much on the absence of a history of sanctions. It is also important to emphasize that misconducts are not an independent measure of an incarcerated person's behavior in prison but are rather the product of interactions between correctional staff and people who are incarcerated.¹⁰

Participation in academic college education reduced the risk of reconviction following release by at least 66 percent.

Employment and wages

Vera researchers found that students, compared to non-students, had a 30 percent lower probability of obtaining formal employment within the first two quarters post-release. However, no significant difference was detected in employment rates between students and non-students in the first four quarters post-release. Despite similar employment rates in the first year following release, students earned almost \$3,900 less in total wages over this period compared to non-students. The lower probability of employment could be due to students deferring their job search to complete their education, though Vera did not have the data to evaluate this hypothesis. Alternatively, if students were more likely to be self-employed—entrepreneurship being a goal for participating in higher education—this could potentially underestimate their employment rates, as people who are self-employed do not appear in DOL's unemployment insurance dataset.¹¹ The observed results might be influenced by the lack of pre-incarceration employment and wage data, potentially leading to poor matching between students and non-students, potentially biasing the study's results.

Cost analysis

Cost analysis involves quantifying and assessing the costs associated with a given initiative or program. It typically breaks down costs into direct and indirect expenses, associating costs with certain program components, or classifying costs by type, to provide a comprehensive overview of the total financial resources required for implementation. This type of analysis is instrumental in understanding the financial feasibility of the initiative, estimating its cost-effectiveness, and informing budget planning and resource allocation decisions.

Direct costs in prison education include monetary costs directly spent on implementation, such as books, equipment, technology, transportation, and faculty and staff salaries. Some of these costs were reimbursed under CJII, while others were funded through different sources. Some programs incurred significant costs for reentry services for students leaving prison, including public transportation passes, food and clothing assistance, case management services, tablets or laptops, and graduation ceremony organization costs. These were mostly covered by private donations, grants, or other resources available to the college program.

Indirect costs refer to in-kind costs, such as donated time and resources, or tuition remission absorbed by the college provider. Examples include donated staff time for reentry assistance, main campus students assisting incarcerated students, personal resource use by instructors for prison visits, and other donations of time, expertise, and material resources.

Vera researchers calculated both the **average cost** per student, including direct costs that were both reimbursed and unreimbursed by CJII, as well as the **step-fixed cost** considering all funding sources. The **average cost** is the total cost of the program divided by the number of students. These total costs include both fixed cost, or those that do not vary by the number of students in the program, and variable cost, which change depending on the number of students served. The **step-fixed cost** is the cost associated with enrolling an additional group of students to the program. Step-fixed costs are appropriately calculated in contexts where some costs do not vary until certain thresholds of people served are passed. This could include, for example, paying an additional faculty member to teach a new class or section. Step-fixed costs better reflects what the scale up of college education in New York may look like, as education programs do not grow a single student at a time, but in groups of students at a time. When calculating these costs, a “group” of students was defined variably, either as 10 or 20 students, depending on the specific college and the fluctuations in their yearly enrollment. The step-fixed cost was empirically determined from the differences in costs across enrollment sizes.

Results of the cost analysis are discussed in terms of two groups of colleges: “education” colleges and “education plus reentry services” colleges. “Education plus reentry services” colleges provided students who were incarcerated with reentry services and support specific to their status as people who are incarcerated or leaving incarceration, and which would not be relevant to students on main campuses who were not formerly incarcerated. These “education plus reentry services” colleges included staff time and materials needed to implement a graduation ceremony in a prison, and books and technology specific to the prison environment. These colleges incurred an average program-running cost of \$30,459 per student. Of this, CJII reimbursed an average of \$3,451 per student, and the remaining costs, slightly more than \$27,000, were covered through other sources. The cost of adding a group of additional students to these programs, or the step-fixed cost, was estimated to be just over \$10,000 (\$10,464) per student.

“Education” colleges, which offer fewer services due to limitations in sourcing additional resources or absorbing associated costs, incurred an average cost of \$4,301 per student. CJII reimbursed an average of

CJII's average reimbursement to colleges amounted to \$2,840 per student for the year, a total investment of \$968,000. This figure falls considerably short of the actual cost required to operate a college-in-prison program, especially for colleges providing reentry services and incarceration-specific supports to students.

\$2,659 per student, with the remaining balance sourced or absorbed by the colleges, totaling approximately \$1,642. The step-fixed cost for these colleges was estimated at around \$3,800 per student.

Despite the variance in cost, both types of colleges show that the cost per student to expand these programs is lower than the current cost per student. This suggests that as these programs grow, the cost per student may reduce further due to efficiency gains. Major drivers for the cost difference between the two college types include tuition or tuition discounting (\$20,207 versus \$1,894) and the cost of reentry services and incarceration-specific supports. These supports amount to nearly \$4,000 per student at "education plus reentry services" colleges, which is almost equivalent to the total cost per student at "education" colleges.

Program leads from "education" colleges expressed a desire to offer more services and supports to their students, such as academic and career advising, but noted a lack of resources as a significant barrier. The report concludes that while CIP has been successful in scaling up college-in-prison programs, colleges still need to secure funding from other sources or absorb costs not covered by CJII. A forthcoming cost-benefit analysis by

Vera will assess whether these additional costs may result in further benefits, including averted convictions and incarcerations and gains in employment and wages.

Implications

The most important finding from this study was that participation in college in prison reduced recidivism following release by at least 66 percent. Despite these benefits, the desire for postsecondary education among people in prison far outstrips the capacity of colleges to provide education. Serious and ongoing resource constraints has been a major cause for the lack of education supply. Both the average cost and the step-fixed costs per student at "education" and "education plus reentry services" colleges exceeded the reimbursement per student provided by CJII, indicating that while CJII was successful in supporting a scale up of college-in-prison programming, colleges nonetheless had to absorb unreimbursed costs, find supplementary funding sources, or use in-kind donations of time and materials to provide services and supports.

Although CJII reimbursement did not cover the average cost per student at the participating colleges, the costs of

Expanded postsecondary prison education can reduce recidivism. Most people in prison aspire to and are qualified for higher education. Yet, funding for these programs is too often insufficient—and colleges remain cautious about becoming dependent on government funding.

providing college in prison, at least at “education” colleges, is entirely reasonable, if we compare the average and step-fixed costs to the allowable funding amount for Pell Grants and TAP (a maximum of \$6,895 for Pell Grants and potentially up to \$5,665 a year for TAP, depending on the income and family structure of the student).¹²

However, relying solely on government funding presents challenges. Neither TAP nor Pell Grants cover additional services offered by some colleges, which may have played a significant role in the reductions in new convictions found in this analysis.¹³ Second, the cost structure of these programs also depends on programs being able to leverage economies of scale, which might not be possible for smaller, newer programs. Third, college reliance on public funding excludes incarcerated people who do not qualify, due to loan default, inability to access necessary paperwork, or noncitizen status. A final issue is the profound insecurity the field of college in prison expresses about relying on government funding sources. Several program leads at both “education” and “education plus reentry services” colleges expressed deep concerns about college-in-prison programming becoming dependent on government funding, since the withdrawal of that funding in the 1990s decimated the entire field.

Increased postsecondary educational opportunities in prisons could contribute to significant reductions in recidivism. However, many services not covered by government funding such as reentry services and additional supports (for example, public transportation passes, assistance with food and clothing, provision of technology) could also play a role in reducing recidivism, underscoring the need for continued investment in reentry services.

College in prison can also foster a sense of community, enhance social and familial obligations, boost motivation and aspirations, promote self-reflection, and improve empathy.

The lack of impact on employment, wages, or misconducts, could indicate that these factors are not the primary pathways through which college education in prison reduces recidivism. Possible mechanisms by which college in prison reduces recidivism could be through improving perceptions of personal agency, reducing depression and anxiety, increasing self-esteem and resiliency, and enhancing communication and planning skills.¹⁴ College in prison can also foster a sense of community, enhance social and familial obligations, boost motivation and aspirations, promote self-reflection, and improve empathy.¹⁵ These factors may support individuals in avoiding future criminal legal system involvement, independent of material factors like employment. This suggests that college, in and of itself, whether or not it leads to employment or reduces behavioral issues during incarceration, leads to fewer new convictions following release.

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About this report

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Endnotes

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- 6 A high-quality research design in the field of impact evaluation is one which allows for causal attribution between one or more independent variables and an outcome of interest. A high-quality design employs the use of a control group or reference group which mimics what would have happened to the treatment or intervention group had they not had the intervention, thus allowing for a counterfactual comparison.
- 7 This report uses the plural "misconducts" in favor of the singular "misconduct" to refer to counts of sanctions filed by corrections officers—a measure for the study's outcome of interest regarding in-facility behavior by people who are incarcerated. Misconduct, singular, does not imply a count measure and, as a common word in English, using this term may lead to confusion between the study's outcome and its measure. Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, "The Effects of Prison-Based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment," *The Prison Journal* 94, no. 4 (2014), 454–478, 474, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885514548009>; Stephen J. Steurer, Linda Smith, and Alice Tracy, *OCE/CEA Three State Recidivism Study* (Lanham, MD: Correctional Education Association, 2001), 43, <https://perma.cc/C47Z-KT8X>; Pompoco, Wooldredge, Lugo, et al., "Reducing Inmate Misconduct," 2017, 534–535; Edward J. Latessa, Melissa Lugo, Amanda R. Pompoco, et al., *Evaluation of Ohio's Prison Programs* (Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute, 2015), 5–8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290810844_Evaluation_of_Ohio's_Prison_Programs.
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