

Education Behind Bars

Online Learning for Incarcerated Individuals

The implementation of online learning technology to expand educational opportunities among the nation's incarcerated population is a compassionate, cost-efficient way to break the cycle of incarceration, reduce instances of recidivism, and improve the reintegration process for formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and their communities.

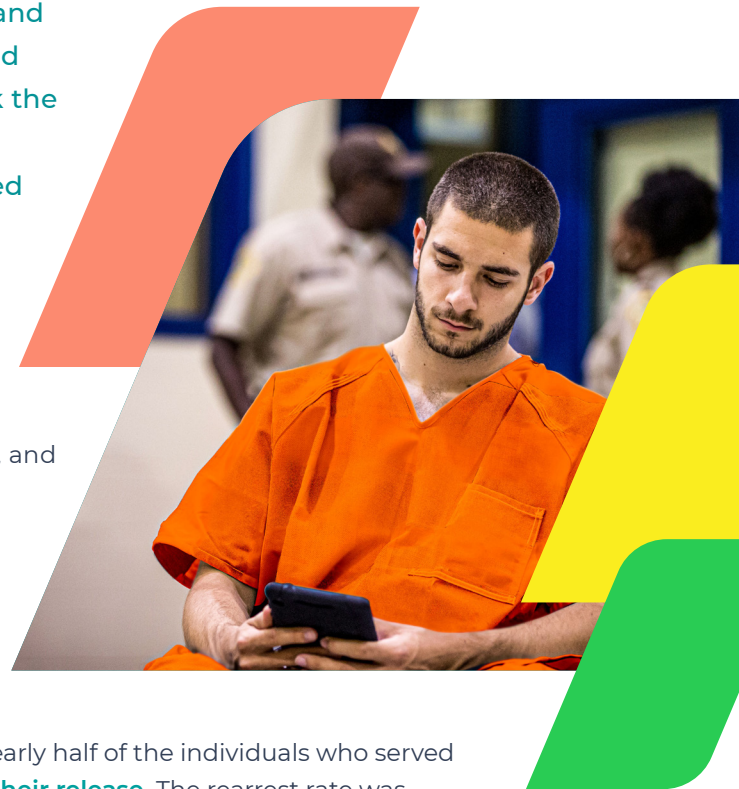
Introduction – Education and Incarceration

The United States incarcerates more of its citizens per capita than any other nation in the world, with nearly **2 million people** currently incarcerated across thousands of federal, state, and local correctional facilities.

Over the past several decades state spending on incarceration has accelerated – in many states **outpacing spending on public education several times over** – with a bulk of the money spent on staffing and housing a growing population of incarcerated individuals. Rehabilitative outcomes have not been commensurate with that increased spending, however, as nearly half of the individuals who served sentences in federal prison were **rearrested within eight years of their release**. The rearrest rate was highest (over 60 percent) among those who had not completed a high school education.

Providing access to education for incarcerated individuals is a cost-effective way to break the cycle of incarceration. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, **41 percent of incarcerated individuals** have not received a high school diploma or equivalent degree, compared to just 18 percent of the general population.

Discussion about the intersection of education and incarceration has become more prevalent as recent public focus has shifted slightly from the purely punitive aspects of incarceration to methods of reducing rates of recidivism and improving the chances of successful reintegration for the formerly incarcerated.



A History of Correctional Education

The **history of education** in corrections facilities in America is nearly as old as the nation itself. Much like the overall culture of the time, the foundation of correctional education in the late 1700s was heavily influenced by Puritanical religion and consisted mainly of literacy programs designed to ensure prisoners could achieve spiritual atonement for their crimes through reading and understanding the Bible.

As time wore on, more secular subjects, like geography and arithmetic, were introduced to correctional education curricula. In 1870, corrections leaders from across the country founded the National Prison Association – which would later become the American Correctional Association – and established a **Declaration of Principles** by which all corrections institutions would abide. Among these principles was Opportunity, and more specifically the promotion of “positive behavioral change leading to responsible citizenship” through educational services.

Nearly a century later, with passage of legislation including the **Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965**, education as a public good drew national attention. As a result, public support grew for the expansion of the concept of education in correctional facilities, with an increased focus on education as a rehabilitative tool. States began implementing post-secondary programs in their prisons, and soon **states like Texas** would credit these programs for reducing recidivism.

A provision of another piece of legislation, the Higher Education Act of 1965, authorized incarcerated individuals to use **federal Pell Grants** to pay for college classes. Through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, there were **hundreds of college-in-prison programs** throughout the country. A **crime bill passed in 1994**, however, banned all incarcerated individuals from receiving Pell Grant funding, and as a result the number of correctional education programs dropped dramatically.

In 2015, the Obama-Biden administration revived this program as the Second Chance Pell Experiment. In 2022, the Biden-Harris administration announced an **expansion of this program**, allowing even more colleges, universities, and correctional institutions to participate.

Benefits of Correctional Education

Access to education has proven to be a gateway to professional and economic success and mobility. In the same way, since higher-paying jobs often have some kind of basic educational requirement, a lack of access to education can reduce options for employment. Financial strain or feelings of desperation associated with unemployment or low-quality employment have long been understood to be **causal factors for engagement in criminal activity**. Research shows that on average, incarcerated individuals who participated in education programs while incarcerated were **43 percent less likely to recidivate** than those who did not. They also had a 13 percent higher chance of obtaining employment post-release than those who did not.

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The benefits of increasing access to correctional education are not limited to the incarcerated. Research has shown that corrections facilities that began offering postsecondary education options to incarcerated individuals saw a substantially safer work environment for its staff, with a **decrease in reported incidents of violence**. The children of incarcerated parents who complete a degree program during their incarceration have a **higher likelihood of completing postsecondary education** themselves, thus disrupting the potential cycle of poverty and criminality. A decline in recidivism would also mean a reduced per-prisoner cost to taxpayers, potentially **translating to millions** of dollars saved. Some estimates suggest every investment of \$1 into an incarcerated individual's education **could save up to \$5** in reincarnation costs.

The Bureau of Justice estimates that **at least 95 percent** of individuals who are incarcerated in State corrections facilities will be released at some point. It is in the best interests of everyone that these individuals be given the opportunities and resources necessary to reintegrate into their communities as successfully as possible.

Examples of Successful Correctional Education Programs

The efficacy of correctional education programs is not without evidence. On the contrary, several of these programs have been in place for years throughout the country, and their outcomes speak to their benefit.


- The **College Inside** program at Chemeketa Community College helps incarcerated students in Oregon State Penitentiary and Santiam Correctional Institution earn their GED and other vocational certifications. Since 2007, 293 students have graduated. The recidivism rate among graduates is 6%, just a fraction of Oregon's **overall recidivism rate**.
- **Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison** has provided college education, life skills, and reentry support to incarcerated individuals at six corrections facilities throughout New York state since 1998. Within three years of their release, the recidivism rate for Hudson Link graduates is less than 2%, compared to the **state-wide rate of about 40%**
- **Project Rebound** provides education and resources to formerly incarcerated students across 14 California State University campuses. Between 2016 and 2020, the program reported zero recidivism among its students, compared to California's average recidivism rate of 50 percent.

Bringing Correctional Education Online

In a world constantly connected by electronics, and especially with a job market that increasingly requires some semblance of digital literacy, there is a strong case to be made for the expansion of online learning options within correctional facilities. Providing opportunities for asynchronous learning – where incarcerated individuals can access learning materials on their own schedule – would give students flexibility to study how and when they are at their best, rather than forcing them to conform with a classroom schedule. And with many corrections facilities being located in less densely populated areas, online learning reduces the needs and security concerns around in-person staffing.

Access to technology, however, varies wildly from facility to facility. Incarcerated individuals located near a major city may benefit from its infrastructure and have access to high-speed internet, while facilities in a more rural area may not have the capacity for it.





More recently, the innovation of tablet technology has offered revolutionary opportunities in both communication and education within correctional facilities. In addition to delivering a more customizable user experience, tablets can store vast amounts of digital information at relatively low cost, making them a more efficient teaching tool. Tablets can also store entertainment content that can be used as a learning incentive for students. An increasing number of companies, including **American Prison Data Systems, Edovo,** and ViaPath Technologies have piloted programs that provide tablets so incarcerated individuals can access educational and vocational training.

About ViaPath Technologies

ViaPath Technologies is a leading global technology company that focuses on facilitating connections between incarcerated individuals and their families, and providing life-changing educational and vocational training opportunities to those individuals during their sentences.

ViaPath first began in the late 1980's as a telephone company, providing basic telephony services to incarcerated individuals in corrections facilities and county jails with wall mounted phones. The company has evolved significantly over the past 30 years. Today, ViaPath takes a holistic approach by providing comprehensive, low-cost, secure and technologically advanced solutions designed to produce better outcomes for all involved in the corrections system: incarcerated individuals, their friends and family, formerly incarcerated citizens returning to their communities and corrections agencies and facilities.

In 2013, ViaPath Technologies introduced its signature solution, the Inspire® Tablet. This revolutionary, secure hand-held device allows the incarcerated to maintain regular contact with their loved ones, as well as access ViaPath's learning management system, which features an array of educational and job training resources that users can access on their own time, without the need for additional in-person teaching staff. Regular use of the tablet prepares incarcerated individuals for successful reintegration upon completion of their sentence, all while helping maintain a calmer and safer correction environment.

ViaPath also offers the best in-facility high-speed internet access, thanks to its proprietary LTE wireless enabled capabilities. This allows more incarcerated individuals to access ViaPath's services anytime, anywhere, right from their cell.

Since launching in October 2021, nearly 50,000 incarcerated users of ViaPath's learning management system have completed over 450,000 online courses, covering a broad range of personal and professional learning topics. Less than a year after its launch, users of ViaPath's tablets viewed more than 2 million hours of educational content. In their efforts to provide the nation's incarcerated population with increased learning opportunities, ViaPath has partnered with eLearning solutions provider CypherWorx to offer access to CypherWorx's extensive course catalog on their Inspire® Tablet. Formerly incarcerated individuals continue to have access to these learning courses for a full year post-release, to ensure no disruption to the reentry process.

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