

# Empowering Returning Citizens

## Second Chances through Education

Educational and vocational programs play a critical role in correctional facilities and are significant in fostering successful rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated individuals into society. These programs offer skills training, academic education, and support which are crucial in preparing returning citizens for employment post-incarceration. Educational and vocational programs have a positive impact on breaking the cycle of recidivism, reducing crime rates, and creating a safer, more productive community.

### Mass Incarceration & the Labor Crisis

Mass incarceration has been a persistent issue in the United States, leading to overcrowded prisons and jails, and soaring recidivism rates. Furthermore, mass incarceration significantly impacts the labor force. Recently, employers have experienced a labor crisis because of citizens not seeking employment. Equipping incarcerated individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to qualify for and obtain employment is a solution to the mass incarceration and labor crisis concerns of today. Over the past several years, correctional authorities have started recognizing the significance of educational and vocational programs in the rehabilitation process. In this document we will highlight the importance of these programs, both during and after incarceration, in transforming lives and building a foundation for a better future. Moreover, educational and vocational programs provide returning citizens with the skills needed to secure employment in a society where there are more job vacancies than applicants.

In addition to the individuals who have been incarcerated, the broader economy and society are impacted by mass incarceration. The sheer number of people incarcerated can contribute to a reduction in the available workforce. Many individuals who could otherwise be contributing to the economy and the labor market are removed from the workforce due to their imprisonment. This contributes to labor shortages and can hinder economic growth. Addressing the impact of mass incarceration on the labor force requires a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. Investing in educational and vocational programs within correctional facilities can equip individuals with the skills and qualifications needed to access employment opportunities upon release.



## Stigmas Interfere with Post-Incarceration Employment

Returning citizens experience barriers to employment post-incarceration. Nationally, over 650,000 inmates leave prison every year.<sup>1</sup> About two-thirds of incarcerated individuals were employed at least part-time pre-incarceration,<sup>2</sup> yet less than half of formerly incarcerated individuals secure employment.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 75% of returning citizens remain unemployed one-year post-release.<sup>4</sup> Many employers are hesitant to hire formerly incarcerated individuals due to their criminal histories, lack of recent engagement in the labor force, and the assumption that they lack the required skills. Considering that 95% of incarcerated individuals return to the community and that employment is linked to successful community reintegration, programs focused on increasing educational levels and building marketable skills are necessary in jails and prisons.

Justice-involved individuals tend to be undereducated and underemployed compared to the general population.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the stigmas of a criminal record involve many biases that interfere with returning citizens gaining employment. When persons are categorized as less than, it may impair individual quality of life.<sup>5</sup> Due to the stigmatizing mark of a criminal record along with the association between education levels and employment, justice-involved individuals experience high rates of unemployment.<sup>6</sup> Attending educational and vocational programming during incarceration prepare justice-involved individuals to overcome stigmas in preparation for a successful reintegration to society, and to enter the workforce.

## Breaking Employment Barriers through Education

Breaking down employment barriers through education is a pivotal strategy in facilitating the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into the workforce. Research has consistently shown that access to education during incarceration significantly enhances post-release employment prospects. According to a study by the RAND Corporation, inmates who participate in educational programs are 13% more likely to find employment upon release compared to those who do not engage in such programs.<sup>7</sup> These programs equip individuals with vocational skills and academic knowledge, making them more competitive candidates in the job market. Education not only imparts practical expertise but also helps participants develop a sense of purpose and self-worth,<sup>8</sup> which can contribute to a more positive self-presentation during job interviews and interactions with potential employers.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, education plays a vital role in addressing the negative perceptions that employers often hold regarding individuals with criminal records. Research has identified that participation in correctional education programs was associated with reduced employer concerns about hiring formerly incarcerated individuals.<sup>10</sup> Education serves as a powerful narrative, allowing individuals to showcase their commitment to personal growth, rehabilitation, and transformation. This narrative shift assists with dispelling misconceptions and biases, providing employers with a more nuanced understanding of an applicant's potential. By emphasizing the skills and knowledge gained through education, formerly incarcerated individuals can effectively counteract negative stereotypes and demonstrate their readiness to contribute positively to the workforce.





## Vocational Programs as a Solution to Second Chance Employment

Vocational training plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between post-incarceration individuals and the ever-evolving demands of the job market. By offering targeted skill development, vocational programs prepare inmates for employment opportunities that are not only aligned with current industry needs but also address local labor shortages. Recent research underscores the value of vocational training in connecting former inmates with sustainable employment, highlighting the importance of programs that equip individuals with skills that are in high demand within specific regions.<sup>11</sup> For example, partnerships between correctional facilities and technology companies have led to vocational initiatives focused on software development and IT support, directly addressing the shortage of skilled workers in the tech sector.


Vocational training's ability to match job market demands post-incarceration is further evidenced by its adaptability to emerging industries. As technological advancements reshape various sectors, vocational programs can swiftly incorporate training for new roles and positions. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice, correctional education programs that prioritize vocational training in emerging fields such as renewable energy, healthcare technology, and advanced manufacturing have shown promising results in connecting former inmates to high-growth, high-wage occupations.<sup>12</sup> This flexibility not only ensures that individuals are equipped with relevant skills but also positions them at the forefront of industry trends, enhancing their employability and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the workforce upon reintegration.

Two notable examples of vocational programs within correctional facilities highlight the potential for transformative impact and successful reintegration. The "Last Mile" initiative, implemented in several U.S. prisons, offers coding and technology education to inmates, equipping them with skills relevant to the modern job market.<sup>13</sup> Studies demonstrate that participants in the program experience improved post-release employment prospects and reduced recidivism rates. Similarly, incarcerated individuals nationwide participate in employment programs with private companies to produce products and services, leading to enhanced employability, self-esteem, and overall well-being.<sup>14</sup> These examples underscore the effectiveness of vocational programs in preparing individuals for successful reentry into society by equipping them with practical skills and a sense of purpose.

## The Void of Education and Vocational Programs in Correctional Facilities

Although education and vocational programs have been proven as beneficial in successful community reintegration, many correctional facilities in various jurisdictions continue to lack comprehensive education and vocational programs. Thus, numerous jails and prisons are missing critical opportunities for inmate rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. This absence of educational initiatives denies incarcerated individuals the chance to acquire essential skills and knowledge that could empower them to transition into the workforce upon release. For instance, a study conducted by Eikland and associates found that a significant number of inmates do not have access to basic literacy and numeracy programs, hindering their ability to pursue further education or vocational training.<sup>15</sup> This educational deficit perpetuates cycles of low employability and contributes to a higher likelihood of recidivism, ultimately hampering the potential for these individuals to break free from the criminal justice system.





Furthermore, the dearth of vocational programs within correctional facilities compounds the issue, failing to prepare inmates for viable career pathways post-incarceration. In the United States, a study by the Prison Policy Initiative revealed that the majority of incarcerated individuals lack access to vocational training, leaving them without the practical skills necessary to secure gainful employment.<sup>16</sup> This omission has far-reaching consequences, as individuals are released without the means to contribute positively to their communities and support themselves. The absence of comprehensive education and vocational programs within correctional facilities underscores a critical need for reform and investment in initiatives that empower inmates with the tools to break the cycle of incarceration and establish fulfilling, productive lives.

In stark contrast to the potential positive impact of such programs, the lack of education and vocational training perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage and criminal involvement. Without access to educational opportunities, inmates face barriers to personal development and the acquisition of marketable skills. The consequences ripple beyond individual lives, affecting families, communities, and society at large. It is imperative that correctional systems prioritize the implementation of comprehensive education and vocational programs, recognizing their potential to not only reduce recidivism rates but also contribute to a safer, more prosperous society.

## Empowering Returning Citizens through Digital Learning

The integration of education and vocational programs on digital tablets within correctional facilities has emerged as a transformative approach, offering incarcerated individuals unprecedented access to knowledge, skills, and personal growth opportunities. Digital tablets provide a versatile platform that enables inmates to engage in a wide range of educational activities, from academic coursework to vocational training, while also fostering a sense of responsibility and accountability. A recent study demonstrated that inmates who had access to tablet-based education exhibited improved self-discipline, time management, and goal-setting skills, highlighting the positive impact of such programs on inmates' personal development.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, digital tablet programs address the limitations often associated with traditional classroom settings in correctional facilities, such as limited resources, space, and qualified instructors. Tablets enable self-paced learning, allowing inmates to tailor their educational experiences to their unique needs and learning styles. Tablet-based education offers flexibility and adaptability that provides opportunities for inmates to develop a wide array of skills, from basic literacy to advanced vocational competencies. In this way, tablet-based programs empower individuals with marketable skills that align with current job market demands, enhancing their employability upon release.

Furthermore, tablet-based education and vocational programs have the potential to foster a more rehabilitative environment within correctional facilities. Access to digital resources encourages inmates to engage in constructive activities and utilize their time productively, reducing the likelihood of engaging in negative behaviors. A study by Lopes and associates found that inmates who participated in tablet-based education demonstrated improved social interactions, increased motivation for self-improvement, and a more positive outlook on their post-release prospects.<sup>18</sup> By promoting a culture of learning, responsibility, and personal growth, tablet-based programs contribute to the overall well-being of inmates and the potential for successful reintegration into society.



## About Us

ViaPath Technologies concentrates on breaking the cycle of incarceration and digital exclusion through transformative technology and services for incarcerated individuals, their support network, and correctional agencies. With nearly 500,000 secure digital tablets in jails and prisons nationwide, ViaPath Technologies provides advanced communications, technology and management solutions that facilitate meaningful connections, educational opportunities, and enable successful reintegration for both current and formerly incarcerated individuals. Our secure digital tablets encompass over 20,000 courses related to education, employment, substance use, family needs and other areas of interest. Additionally, our secure digital tablets offer a convenient secure communication method via messaging and video visitations for inmates and families.

ViaPath Technologies is headquartered in Falls Church, Virginia, with an employee presence throughout North America. To learn more, please visit [viapath.com](http://viapath.com).

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