



## When the Cell Door Closes, a Window of Educational Opportunity Should Open

By Kahryn A. Riley

### Summary

Data show that educating prisoners helps reduce recidivism and bolster public safety, so let's not bar prisoners from the financial aid they need to pursue a college education.

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The American criminal justice system is often thought of as a continuum of institutions that begins with the enactment and enforcement of criminal laws and ends with a trial, conviction and prison sentence. But when the cell door closes, a window of opportunity to bolster public safety opens. We are learning from a growing body of research and a pilot program here in Michigan that both the quantity and the quality of time inmates spend behind bars make a difference for their behavior after release.

Policymakers and citizens alike, therefore, need to ask what should be happening inside our prisons. For incarceration does far more than punish a single person for a single crime. Instead, it creates a new group of people with significant and often lifelong barriers to rejoining society, creating risks for us all. We must make sure that, as far as it is possible, we minimize the societywide risks of incarceration.

Doing so will call for policies and practices that may appear too lenient to “tough on crime” proponents, but the numbers don't lie. The data show that “smart on crime” policies that call for individualized sentences and opportunities for inmates to take up self-improvement activities while incarcerated lower recidivism and equip them to return successfully to their jobs, families and communities. That is, getting smart on crime helps make Michigan safer and more prosperous.

Our state is already making significant strides with smart-justice strategies. Our trial court system, for example, includes 185 “problem-solving courts.” These specialized legal venues aim to help defendants with certain underlying challenges — such as drug addiction, alcoholism, or mental illness — by connecting them to the services and treatment that make it more likely they will be safe and law-abiding. Our prisons host two — soon to be three — innovative in-prison vocational schools called Vocational Villages, where prisoners can be trained, fully certified and, often, offered jobs working in skilled trades upon their release.

Michigan prisons also lead the nation in offering postsecondary education to inmates. Our Corrections Department was selected to participate in a national demonstration project, Pathways from Prison, funded by several influential foundations, including the Vera Institute and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The project helped Michigan prisoners earn college credits and let hundreds of students gain additional educational and employment opportunities.



Education in prison can reduce an inmate's likelihood of committing another crime after his release.

Our state was also chosen as an experimental site for the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, in which the U.S. Department of Education, with support from Secretary Betsy DeVos, lifts the ban on Pell Grants for state and federal prisoners. The change allows three two-year colleges (Delta College, Jackson College and Mott Community College) to offer in-person instruction in Michigan prisons.

Both projects have enjoyed success, have paved the way for additional innovations in education and, most importantly, changed many hundreds of lives.

Several other colleges and universities educate Michigan prisoners in cooperation with the Corrections Department, offering either in-person or correspondence classes. But many aspiring students in prison miss the opportunity to enhance their education because certain statutes and regulations limit their eligibility for financial aid, or keep them from receiving it at all.

For example, several state programs that offer financial aid, including the Michigan Tuition Grant, the Michigan Competitive Scholarship, and the Michigan Educational Opportunity Grant, specifically exclude prisoners. And the Michigan Department of the Treasury has issued regulations that ban prisoners from receiving the Michigan Nursing Scholarship and the Children of Veterans Tuition Grant. The Michigan State Aid Office might also count incarceration against a prisoner seeking financial aid under other programs, though it's not clear if it consistently does so.

We know that education is valuable for a person's career prospects and that a steady job and income are valuable in reducing recidivism. We should, then, beware of government-imposed barriers to education and work. Let's work to eliminate those barriers for the prisoners' sakes — and for ours.

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