Education Opportunities in Prison Are Key to Reducing Crime

Education can be a gateway to social and economic mobility. This vital opportunity, however, is currently being denied to a significant portion of the more than 2.3 million individuals currently incarcerated in the United States. Compared with 18 percent of the general population, approximately 41 percent of incarcerated individuals do not hold a high school diploma. Similarly, while 48 percent of general population has received any postsecondary or college education, only 24 percent of people in federal prisons have received the same level of education. In 2016, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that only 35 percent of state prisons provide college-level courses, and these programs only serve 6 percent of incarcerated individuals nationwide. In 2015, the Obama administration announced the Second Chance Pell Pilot program—an experimental program allowing 12,000 qualifying incarcerated students to take college-level courses while in prison. The future of this program is uncertain as Congress decides whether to include Pell Grants for prisons—which currently receives less than 1 percent of total Pell program funding—in their reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Receiving a quality education continues to be out of reach for much of the prison population due to a lack of funding for, and access to, the materials needed for the success of these programs.

According to the Hamilton Project, the United States spent more than $80 billion on corrections in 2010, with the majority of the burden put on states. In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education released an analysis which showed that over the course of three decades—from 1979 to 2013—state and local spending on prisons and jails increased at three times the rate of funding for pre-K-12 public education over the same years. To put that into perspective, the state of Maryland currently spends around $12,000 per pre-K-12 public school student per year compared with around $37,000 per incarcerated person per year. Nationwide, the bulk of corrections spending goes toward housing the ever-growing prison population—a consequence of the rapidly expanding U.S. penal system that disproportionately punishes low-income people of color.

Rather than spending more to house the growing prison population and to fund excessive rates of incarceration, federal and state governments should focus instead on supporting rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. According to a study by the U.S. Sentencing Commission (USSC), nearly half of all individuals released from federal prisons are rearrested within eight years of their release, and around half of those rearrested are sent back to jail. The same study found that individuals younger than 21 who are released from federal prison are rearrested at the highest rates of any age group. Individuals who did not complete high school were rearrested at the highest rate—60.4 percent—while those who had a college degree were rearrested at a rate of 19.1 percent. While incarcerated young adults and school-aged children are more likely to be rearrested, they also have a lot to gain from educational opportunities while in prison.

There is a logical argument for prison education: It is a cost-effective way to reduce crime and leads to long-term benefits across the entire U.S. population. In 2016, the RAND Corporation produced a report that showed that individuals who participate in any type of educational program while in prison are 43 percent less likely to return to prison. In addition to reducing recidivism, education can improve outcomes from one generation to the next. Research shows that children with parents with college degrees are more likely to complete college, which can create social mobility for families. Prisons with college programs have less violence among incarcerated individuals, which creates a safer environment for both incarcerated individuals and prison staff. The significant personal benefits of prison education include increased personal income, lower unemployment, greater political engagement and volunteerism, and improved health outcomes.

Moreover, high recidivism—which is exacerbated by lower educational attainment—also reflects a failure of the criminal justice system at large. Formerly incarcerated individuals with low levels of education often find themselves without the financial resources or social support systems upon their release from prison and therefore are more vulnerable to committing criminal acts rather than becoming reintegrated into society. Criminality negatively impacts families and communities and diverts money and resources that should be spent on preventative measures aimed at keeping people out of prison. Numerous studies highlight the negative social, psychological, and developmental effects of incarceration on the approximately 2.7 million children under age 18 who have at least one parent in prison. These negative effects can include unstable family environments, economic troubles, increased delinquency, poor school performance, and even trauma– and stress-induced mental illness.

Investing in prison education rather than increased incarceration will also benefit the American economy. For any individual, not having a high school diploma closes doors to higher education, training, and employment opportunities. For formerly incarcerated individuals, the disadvantage of not having a high school diploma is compounded by the myriad barriers to successful reentry and additional stigma they face as they reenter their communities and the workforce. On average, formerly incarcerated individuals earn 11 percent less than those with no criminal record doing the same job. They are also 15 to 30 percent less likely to find a job in the first place.

While investing in prison education programs will require upfront funding, the long-term economic benefits for states and localities are considerable. For every dollar spent on prison education, taxpayers are estimated to save four to five dollars that would have been spent on incarceration. Putting more money back into consumers’ pockets and providing previously incarcerated individuals the necessary tools to be competitive in the job market will spur economic activity and productivity. It will also help previously incarcerated individuals become stronger players in the market—through taxes and purchasing power—and more self-sufficient citizens less reliant on government programs. Missouri, for example, saved an average of $25,000 per year for every incarcerated individual who left prison and did not return. Nationally, the U.S. economy is estimated to lose around $60 billion per year from loss of labor from the high numbers of incarcerated individuals.

The federal government, states, and localities all play a crucial role in funding educational programs for incarcerated individuals. Additional challenges that many prison education programs face include access to technology—only 14 percent of students in prison are allowed restricted Internet access—as well as the capacity to coordinate large-scale educational programs. Other concerns include ensuring the quality of the education and that the credits are transferrable to both another correctional institution and to the college or university an individual may attend in the future. When these programs are adequately funded and successfully implemented, real change can be made. In 2017, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) took a step in the right direction by awarding more than $7 million to colleges—including Cornell University and New York University—to offer classes in prison. Another example of educational success, The Last Mile at San Quentin State Prison is a nonprofit that partnered with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to provide incarcerated individuals with coding experience.

Education can give people a voice, open up doors to a better future, and restore individuals’ self-esteem and social competence. While providing opportunities for incarcerated individuals to earn a high school and eventually college degree may not fix all the systemic issues seen within the criminal justice system, education seems like a better use of tax money than funding the high recidivism rates that exist across the country. As Horace Mann once said, education is “the great equalizer,” but this only works if the most vulnerable individuals have access to it.

While systemic reforms ultimately rely on government policies and action, individuals can play a role as well. Initiatives such as the Harvard Organization for Prison Education and Reform and the Petey Greene Program, for example, send trained volunteers to tutor incarcerated individuals with the dual goal of advocating for structural reforms to prison education. Volunteering to tutor students in prison who are working toward their GEDs will reap rewards for students, tutors, and society.

From both a moral and logical perspective, cutting prison costs by investing in education provides the greatest benefit to society as a whole, and ensures that all people—regardless of their past—are given an opportunity to thrive in the future.

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