



EDUCATION POLICY Center

at American Institutes for Research ■

THE EDUCATION CONNECTION Helping Ex-Offenders Return to Their Communities

More than 9 million individuals are released from correctional facilities annually, and the transition home is not always easy. Many face numerous obstacles including poverty, drug abuse, family dysfunction, and lack of access to services and treatment. Failure to reconnect can mean that many end up back in prison: 68 percent of those released are incarcerated again within 5 years.

How can education play a role in helping ex-offenders stay out of the justice system? AIR expert Roger Jarjoura shares his insights.

Q. What is the link between education and the challenges facing former prisoners who return to their communities?

- A.** People who go to prison tend to be people with low educational attainment. Many didn't finish high school or didn't get beyond that; many suffer with literacy issues. Many were underemployed before they went to prison, and now, depending on how long they were in prison, they have a gap in their work history, too. To come out and find a job where they're going to be able to support a family [and] support themselves, education is going to be important. Research consistently shows that one of the best predictors that someone is not going to go back out and commit another crime is that they raise their level of educational attainment—either in prison or outside of prison.

Yet, we find in many jurisdictions around the country that people who come out of prison didn't do anything while they were there to raise their level of educational attainment. They are returning to communities that are lower income, where job opportunities are low and where there are many opportunities to [get involved in] criminal enterprises, including selling drugs. So it's a set-up for them, and we let that happen.

Then, to make the situation even more challenging, over the past 20 years we have consistently chipped away at the opportunities for education and for higher educational attainment in our prisons. We took away the opportunity for prisoners to get Pell Grants, so they can't pay for their classes. The state grants for education are going away too, and prisoners don't have access to the kinds of funds that they would need to be able to take college classes. So they do vocational kinds of things, or they're not working on education.

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Q. What kind of policies show promise in addressing this challenge?

A. We live in a time where it's not palatable to the public that we should provide funding to educate prisoners when people are struggling to pay for their own children's education. But that view is disconnected from the economic impact that occurs when people come out of prison and they get back into trouble. We did a study in Indiana, and we found that if we reduce the recidivism rate—which is what we call it when people get back into trouble—by 1 percent, we would save the state and the taxpayers \$1.5 million. We could invest that money to pay for some of these services. So, we may be saving money on the front end by not paying for prisoners' education, but the consequence on the back end is that our prisons are a revolving door.

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Q. Can you share some examples of successful programs or policies?

A. There's a little bit of hope in a couple of places around the country, and New York is one of them. They're piloting the use of Pell Grant dollars again. President Obama is a leader here; over the past year, he has taken a special interest in this. So, we are again seeing the piloting of the use of Pell Grant dollars.

For many years, I was involved in a program called Inside-Out Prison Exchange, which is still thriving. This is an opportunity for prisoners to be involved in college programs where they make up half the students in the class, and the other half of the students are coming from the university. They learn together as peers in the class. That's a really powerful model.

If you see individuals who come out of prison and who have earned a college education while they're in there, they're qualitatively different from other prisoners. It transforms the way they think; it transforms the way that they see themselves. And we know one of the best predictors that somebody is going to turn their life around and stop committing crimes is making that personal internal decision—that's not who I am anymore—and education is one of the ways that really helps them make that determination.

To hear Roger speak about this topic, visit

<http://educationpolicy.air.org/blog/education-connection-helping-ex-offenders-return-their-communities>



Dr. Roger Jarjoura is a principal researcher at AIR and a national expert on mentoring and education of prisoners reentering the workforce.



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