

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND REENTRY

## Higher Education and Incarceration in the United States: The Intersection of Institutions

White Paper by Robert Riggs

From the passage of the United States Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) to Civil Rights-era legislation to President Barack Obama's 2009 push to change federal student loan programs, the US has a history of democratizing access to higher education. As President Lyndon B. Johnson noted when signing the HEA at Southwest Texas State College, where he began his own undergraduate career, "Here the seeds were planted from which grew my firm conviction that for the individual, education is the path to achievement and fulfillment; for the Nation, it is a path to a society that is not only free but civilized; and for the world, it is the path to peace—for it is education that places reason over force. And I think it was then that I made up my mind that this Nation could never rest while the door to knowledge remained closed to any American" (Johnson 1965). Along with the growth of access to higher education, however, has come a more troubling historical trend: a massive expansion of the US criminal justice system. For the millions of men and women who now have criminal conviction records in the US, the degree of openness of Johnson's door to education is anything but certain.

This white paper discusses the state of our knowledge about the intersection of higher education and criminal justice involvement. The paper is divided into six main sections and a number of subsections. The first section describes the size and scope of the US criminal justice system and outlines the disparities that exist in the incarcerated population in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and education level. The second section discusses the fiscal costs associated with the criminal justice system and outlines public spending trends in the areas of criminal justice and higher education. In the third section, discussion turns to what we know about the relationship between education and recidivism rates. Public policy and federal student aid eligibility for people with criminal conviction records are the subjects of the fourth section. The fifth section describes the current landscape of college and university admissions policies

regarding people with criminal conviction records, and the concluding section argues that all currently available evidence points to the benefits of opening the higher education door wider for people with prior criminal justice involvement.

## The US Criminal Justice System: How Big It Is and Whom It Affects

The US criminal justice system has become a massive enterprise that impacts millions of people across the nation. The term “mass incarceration” is now part of public discourse (Garland 2001; Western 2006; Alexander 2010; Drucker 2011), and most citizens are well aware that the US imprisons more people than any nation on earth (Liptak 2008; Walmsley 2009). One study estimates that “a stunning 1 in every 31 adults...is under some form of correctional control” in the US (Pew 2009). In terms of sheer numbers, there were over 2 and a quarter million people behind bars in 2010 and nearly five million more on probation or parole (BJS 2011). From 1987 to 2007, the number of people incarcerated in US prisons increased by an astonishing nearly 300 percent (Pew 2008).

### *Who's In and Who's Out: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*

The long arm of the US criminal justice system does not reach all citizens and communities equally. Significant disparities exist in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. In fact, it is not so much a mass incarceration of the general population that has occurred over roughly the last several decades in the US as the “hyper incarceration” of black and Hispanic males from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Wacquant 2001). The sheer demographic realities of mass incarceration have led Alexander (2010) to point out that it now represents a contemporary form of institutionalized racism.

Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is eight times the rate of white Americans, and “the estimated lifetime risk of imprisonment for black men is 28.5 percent compared to 4.4 percent for white men” (Petit and Western 2004). While an alarming one out of every 31 people in the general population is enmeshed in the US criminal justice system, the rate is “drastically elevated for men (1 in 18) and blacks (1 in 11)” (Pew 2009).

Hispanic populations are 1.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than whites (Hartney and Vuong 2009). One out of every 36 Hispanic men over eighteen years old was in prison in 2007, while this rate among all men over 18 was only one out of 54 (Pew 2008).

While the vast majority of prisoners are men, women are also impacted by the incarceration surge. One out of every 265 women between the ages of 35 and 39 was behind bars in 2007; however, significant differentials in terms of race and ethnicity also exist in the female population: for white women between the ages of 35 and 39, only one out of every 355 was in prison in 2007; for Hispanic women in this age group the rate was one out of every 297; and for black women the rate was a shocking one out of every one-hundred (Pew 2008).

### *Who's Educated and How Much: Inside and Out*

Men and women behind bars are less educated than the general population. A troubling 41.3 percent of the total incarcerated population in 2003 had achieved only some high school or less, compared to just 18.4 percent of the US population (BJS 2003). The disparity is even greater where college education is concerned: Only 12.7 percent of the total incarcerated population in 2003 had a postsecondary degree, while 48.4 percent of the US population did (BJS 2003).

When education level and race are considered together, the incarceration boom's unequal impacts are even more striking. From 1970 to 2000, the rate of incarceration among African-Americans with less than a high school degree increased by a factor of five, and by 2000, 1 out of every 5 black men with less than a high school degree was behind bars (Raphael 2004). Significantly, the rate of incarceration for black men with a college degree did *not* increase over this same period, while increases for white men "overall and within educational groups" were "small by comparison" to those of black men (Raphael 2004).

The rise of mass incarceration must be understood in terms of public spending priorities and trends over the last several decades.

#### Where the Money Goes: Spending on Criminal Justice and Higher Education

The fiscal costs of the US's immense criminal justice system are staggering, draining resources available for education and other public goods. US taxpayers spent 74 billion dollars on corrections in 2007, representing more than a tripling, in raw dollar amount, of expenditures since 1982 (BJS 2012).

A recent study of forty US states found that the current average cost of keeping a person in prison for a single year, including hidden costs that fall outside corrections budgets, is approximately \$30,000, with the state of Kentucky spending the least per inmate per annum at \$14,603 and New York State spending the most at \$60,076 (Henrichson and Delaney 2012). By way of comparison, for roughly the cost of incarcerating one person for a single year in New York, the state could pay the entire in-state tuition of *three students* attending a senior college of the City University of New York *for four years* (based on tuition data from the CUNY website accessed in 2012).

By 2007, states were spending 1 out of every 15 general-fund dollars on corrections, and corrections spending increased 127 percent between 1987 and 2007; in contrast, spending on higher education increased by only 21 percent during the same period (Pew 2008). In effect, what has occurred over the last several decades in the US is a shift of public dollars out of higher education and into corrections. This shift is questionable from both a cost-effectiveness standpoint and a public safety standpoint. We know that people with college education are less likely to go to prison in the first place, and we also know that most people who do go to prison come out eventually (Travis 2005).

#### They Don't All Go Back: Higher Education and Staying Out

Educational disparities evident in prison populations tell us that education matters in terms of who goes to prison and who doesn't, but what happens when people come out of prison? What impact does education have on staying out?

According to what has been called the "iron law of imprisonment," nearly every person in prison is eventually released (Travis 2005), and each year, approximately 700,000 people leave prisons and return to their home communities (CSG 2011). Nationwide, about 40 percent of released prisoners return to prison within three years for a new crime or a parole violation (Pew 2011). Data suggest, however, that this rate drops significantly among releasees who achieve college education either in prison or following release—an outcome that increases public safety and saves tax dollars.

### *College: Getting It Inside and Out*

People who participate in college-in-prison or college-after-prison programs tend to stay out of prison once they come home. A widely cited meta-analysis demonstrated that students who receive at least some college education while incarcerated recidivate at a rate that is 46 percent lower than the rate of released prisoners in general (Chappell 2004). Another study noted a dramatic decline of 87.5 percent in recidivism rates for prisoners who attained Associate's and Bachelor's degrees (Stevens and Ward 1997).

One report summarized the results of a study of a college-in-prison program in Texas. The report notes: "Texas reported the extraordinary recidivism impacts of postsecondary education: '[T]wo years after release, the overall recidivism rate for college degree holders was as low as 12%, and inversely differentiated by type of degree.' The exact figures indicating these inverse recidivism rates for degree recipients were: Associate's (13.7%); Baccalaureate's (5.6%); Master's (0%)" (Karpowitz and Kenner 1995). Colleges that offer higher education to people in prison also report extremely low recidivism rates among students released following their participation in college-in-prison (BPI 2012).

A three-year study of a women's college-in-prison program tracked program participants and non-participants and found that those who had attended college while in prison returned at a rate of only 7.7 percent, while 29.9 percent of those who did not attend college-in-prison were reincarcerated for a new crime or a parole violation during the study's duration (Fine et al. 2004).

Where college education is concerned, it doesn't seem to matter whether people get it inside of prison, outside of prison, or both: they tend to stay out in all cases. The low recidivism rates of people who participate in college while in prison are supported anecdotally by the experiences of organizations that assist people in attaining college degrees after release, which report recidivism rates in the single digits among program participants (Weissman et al. 2009).

One factor that undoubtedly contributes to the post-release success of former prisoners with at least some college education is employability. A study of a small group of prisoners' first-month-out experiences found, "People with some college education were also more likely to get

jobs. Eight of the 49 people who completed the study had taken at least one college-level course, and all but one of them landed a job” (Nelson, Deess and Allen 1999).

In short, everything that is known about higher education for the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated suggests that public policy should be geared toward increasing access to college for these two groups. This has not necessarily been the case, however.

### Public Policy: College for Prisoners and Former Prisoners

Clear indicators suggest that college for prisoners and former prisoners makes public safety and cost-savings sense by helping people stay out of expensive prisons, but public policy has tended toward *decreasing* access to college for prisoners and has presented a mixed-bag of results where formerly incarcerated college students are concerned.

#### *Pell Grants for Prisoners*

The most notable change in federal policy over the last decades in the area of higher education for prisoners concerns Pell grants. In 1994, federal law ended a thirty-year policy of providing Pell grants to prisoners. With the stroke of a pen, people in prison became ineligible to even apply for this federal key to the education door. The results were dramatic:

Almost overnight, the most effective and cost-beneficial correctional policy in the United States collapsed. Some states, like Texas, have found ways to continue post-secondary education in corrections despite this change in federal policy. Many others, like New York, experienced the near total collapse of this outstanding form of crime prevention. In New York State, there were nearly 70 post-secondary prison programs in April of 1994. Four months later, there were four programs left. Today, two of those programs are on the verge of closing. (Karpowitz and Kenner 1995)

The national picture was similar: In 1994, there were 350 college-in-prison programs across the US; just one year later, that number had plummeted to only eight (Fine et al. 2001).

Since the revocation of Pell-eligibility, some college-in-prison programs have arisen to fill the void left behind in the wake of this change in public policy. For example, both the Bard Prison Initiative, which offers Associate’s and Bachelor’s degrees to men and women in five prisons, and “a private voluntary consortium of colleges and universities dedicated to inmate education” at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women (Fine et al. 2004) have found innovative ways to bring college back to prisons in New York State. However, such programs are consistently underfunded, receive virtually no public dollars, and remain small, if highly effective, interventions into a very large problem. Within a policy climate so unfriendly to educating people in prison, ensuring that higher education is widely accessible to men and women *after* release from prison seems especially crucial.

#### *After Release: Federal Student Aid, Drug Convictions, and Second Chances*

In the area of post-prison accessibility, there exist both disquieting trends and encouraging signs. Until 2000, all formerly incarcerated men and women who had served their time and

returned to their home communities were eligible, like any other citizen, to receive federal financial aid, including grants, loans, and work-study assignments. But with the enactment of the “Aid Elimination Provision” of the Higher Education Act in 1998 (which took effect in 2000 and is, ironically, a child of President Johnson’s expansive vision for higher education accessibility), anyone with a drug conviction on their record became ineligible to receive federal aid, significantly barring access to college for hundreds of thousands of students (ACLU 2002). This law was amended in 2006, however.

Today, only people convicted of drug offenses *while they were receiving federal aid* are barred from federal grants, loans, and other student aid programs. For a period of time after the passage of this amendment, many formerly incarcerated students may have continued to believe incorrectly that *any* drug conviction made them ineligible for federal aid:

Unfortunately, question 23 of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) still asks about an applicant’s drug offense history without first clarifying that student aid eligibility will be impacted only if drug convictions were obtained while the individual was receiving federal student aid. The drug offense question is also asked of first-time applicants, who have never received student aid and therefore could not possibly be covered by the law.... Many applicants mistakenly believe that they will be denied aid because of drug convictions that wouldn’t actually disqualify them, and because of their mistaken belief they simply choose not to fill out the FAFSA. The drug offense question serves as a significant barrier to education and employment. (LAC 2012)

Very recently, however, the FAFSA has been revised to solve the problems associated with the drug conviction question. Anyone filling out the FAFSA for the 2012-2013 school year and beyond, barring further restrictions, will be asked whether they have ever received financial aid. Only if they answer “Yes” to this question will they be asked whether they were convicted of a drug crime while receiving aid in the past. Those answering “No” to the question about receiving aid in the past will never even be confronted with the drug conviction question. Although the provision barring aid to those convicted of drug crimes while receiving aid in the past seems highly arbitrary, at least the FAFSA now accurately reflects the current state of federal law. But in terms of federal policy, financial aid eligibility is the exception; in all other areas concerning higher education for people with conviction histories, public policy is relatively silent.

Public policy has spoken about reentry, though. With the passage of the Second Chance Act signed into law in 2008, the legislative and executive branches of the federal government demonstrated a commitment to reducing recidivism and decreasing the financial burden on states from their overblown corrections budgets; the act backed up these commitments by authorizing 165 million dollars for programs dedicated to the successful reentry of released prisoners (CSG 2012).

Few programs, if any, are as effective at facilitating successful reintegration as higher education. As important as federal law and public policy is, much of what people released from prison experience in seeking access to higher education occurs at colleges and universities, specifically at the point of entry—the admissions office.

## College and University Policy: To Admit or Not to Admit

Colleges and universities are relatively free to determine their own admissions policies where people with criminal conviction records are concerned. Currently, “[n]o federal law specifically prohibits discrimination against people with criminal conviction histories” (LAC 2009), and no state laws expressly forbid colleges from using knowledge of past convictions in admissions decisions (Dickerson 2008).

### *Asking the Question: The College Application*

More and more colleges and universities have begun to ask applicants whether they have ever been convicted of a crime, and some go further to enquire about arrests and to conduct background checks on applicants (Weissman et al. 2008; Weissman et al. 2009). In 2007, the Common Application, currently used by 300 colleges, included a question about criminal convictions for the first time (Jaschik 2007).

For applicants with criminal histories, having to “check the box” may in itself prove discouraging enough to make them decide not to apply to college at all, or to apply to a college that doesn’t ask the question. Experience with job applications teaches formerly incarcerated people that “checking the box” often results in an automatic denial of the job (Pager 2003), so they may have little reason to believe the outcome would be any different in applying to colleges that ask.

Colleges that ask the question undoubtedly do not base their decisions solely upon criminal conviction histories, but they would not be collecting such information as part of the application process unless it mattered in terms of the admissions decision. But college and university admissions officers are not qualified to assess a person’s level of rehabilitation from past crimes, only to assess their academic readiness for college. Barmak Nassirian, an executive of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) “believes that the college and university admissions process is not the correct forum in which to evaluate candidates’ criminal records: ‘If an individual is at liberty in our society, why should that individual be denied education? What makes colleges competent to make extra-judicial judgments on people?’” (Dickerson 2008). Of course, the move toward collecting criminal conviction information in the application process is motivated by concern over campus safety. What do we know in this area?

### *Crime and Campus Safety*

Crime obviously does occur on college campuses, perhaps the most relevant of which for the present discussion is violent crime. High-profile cases of campus violence, such as the tragic Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 and the murder of a lab student at Yale in 2009, undoubtedly contribute to the view that knowledge of past criminal involvement is needed to enhance campus safety, but there is little evidence to suggest that students with criminal records are any more likely than other students to commit campus crime, violent or otherwise. As cases in point, neither of the perpetrators involved in the Virginia Tech and Yale crimes had a criminal record.

A single instance of campus violence committed by a person *with* a criminal history is enough to spur university-wide changes. For example, the University of North Carolina implemented a background-check policy for applicants on all sixteen of its campuses following a female student's rape and murder by a male student who had a criminal record (Dickerson 2008). The tragedy of isolated instances of campus violence should not be minimized, but isolated incidents do not constitute evidence that people with conviction histories are more likely to commit campus crime than people without such histories. Beyond tragic accounts of single instances of campus violence perpetrated by students with records, little information exists. We do not know, for example, what percentage of campus violence is committed by students with records or what percentage of all admitted students who have records engage in crime and/or violence on campus.

What we do know, however, is that college campuses are relatively safe places: Students are violently victimized less often than non-students in similar age groups (Baum and Klaus 2005). No evidence currently available suggests that the collection and use of criminal conviction information during the application process contributes to increasing campus safety (Weissman et al. 2009).

Another difficulty arises from the fact that many people, including college students, commit crimes for which they are never convicted, especially those involving drugs. A report on college admissions practices and criminal records notes, "Is it the bad fortune of getting caught and having a criminal conviction that makes one unfit for college admission, or is it the 'criminal behavior?' Clearly, screening for criminal convictions when the behavior itself is relatively commonplace [as with illegal drug use] does not make college campuses any safer" (Weissman et al. 2009).

#### *Data from College Admissions Offices*

There is a dearth of knowledge concerning how many colleges and universities collect information about applicants' criminal records, how they may collect such information, whether and how much criminal records matter in terms of admissions decisions, how applicants with records experience the admissions process, or what impact admitting people with criminal conviction records has on college and university campuses. One important study, however, begins to answer some of these questions.

In 2009, the Center for Community Alternatives administered a survey to 3,248 college admissions offices and received responses from 273 institutions. The survey was designed to learn about the collection and use of criminal history records by institutions of higher learning.

The study's major findings are that 66 percent of responding institutions collect information about criminal records, which leaves a "sizable minority" of schools that do *not* collect such information (Weissman et al. 2009).

Significantly, the study finds that schools that fail to collect criminal justice data "do not report that their campuses are less safe as a result," and the authors note that there is an "absence of



any empirical evidence showing that students with criminal records pose a risk on campus” (Weissman et al. 2009).

For criminal-history applicants subjected to questions about past convictions and, in some cases, additional steps in the application process, applying to college can be difficult, and these measures may constitute a series of hurdles that encourage many to drop out of the application process and forego college altogether (Weissman et al. 2009).

### Conclusion: Open the Higher Education Door for People with Records

We currently have no evidence that a significant amount of campus crime is committed by people with criminal convictions, no evidence that admitting people with criminal records to colleges results in less campus safety, and no evidence that collecting information about applicants’ past criminal involvement increases campus safety.

We do, however, have a plethora of data showing that low education levels are associated with criminal involvement and that attaining higher education is correlated with desistance from crime.

We also know that persistent racial, ethnic, gender, and educational disparities exist in the incarcerated population in the US. Thus, any policy that results in exclusion of people from college based on past criminal involvement has civil rights implications. As one policy paper notes, “Because of the tragic racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system, policies and practices that exclude people with criminal records from institutions of higher learning will set back the gains of the civil rights struggles to open higher education to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity” (Weissman et al. 2008).

This civil rights view is consistent not only with the US’s historical move toward increasing access to higher education but also with President Johnson’s vision of an open door to higher education. College education in this country has historically been one of *the* primary vehicles of class mobility, a way to make it out of poverty and into the middle class or higher.

Today, with millions of citizens carrying criminal conviction records, higher education has the potential to be the avenue by which many motivated and qualified applicants can leave behind criminal pasts to lead productive, fulfilling lives that contribute to the vibrancy, diversity, and richness of college campuses and make a safer society for everyone.

In their efforts to balance risk and access, colleges and universities should not ignore what we know and adopt exclusionary policies based on past criminal involvement. In an article in *Inside Higher Ed*, Nassirian of AARCAO is quoted sending a message to college and university administrators: “If you don’t think people can change, you ought to be in a different line of work’ from higher education, he said. ‘Educating people and putting them on the right path is a social responsibility” (Epstein 2010).

The United States has not gone so far as to declare higher education a right, but most people would agree that it is a social good. Colleges and universities, particularly those funded by

public resources, have a social duty to extend this public good to as many academically qualified students as possible. Colleges will be better for it, and so will society in general.

*This paper was researched and written by Robert Riggs for The Prisoner Reentry Institute of John Jay College of Criminal Justice.*

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