

AAC&U NEWS

INSIGHTS AND CAMPUS INNOVATIONS IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

AAC&U News, May 2021

Facts & Figures

Higher Education, the Criminal Justice System, and COVID-19

With [2.3 million people](#) living in prisons, jails, or other detention centers, the United States incarcerates the most people—and at the highest per capita rate—of any country in the world.

Because incarcerated adults in the United States are disproportionately people of color, low-income people, and people who have not completed a college degree or certificate, providing them with a higher education has become an equity imperative for many colleges and universities.

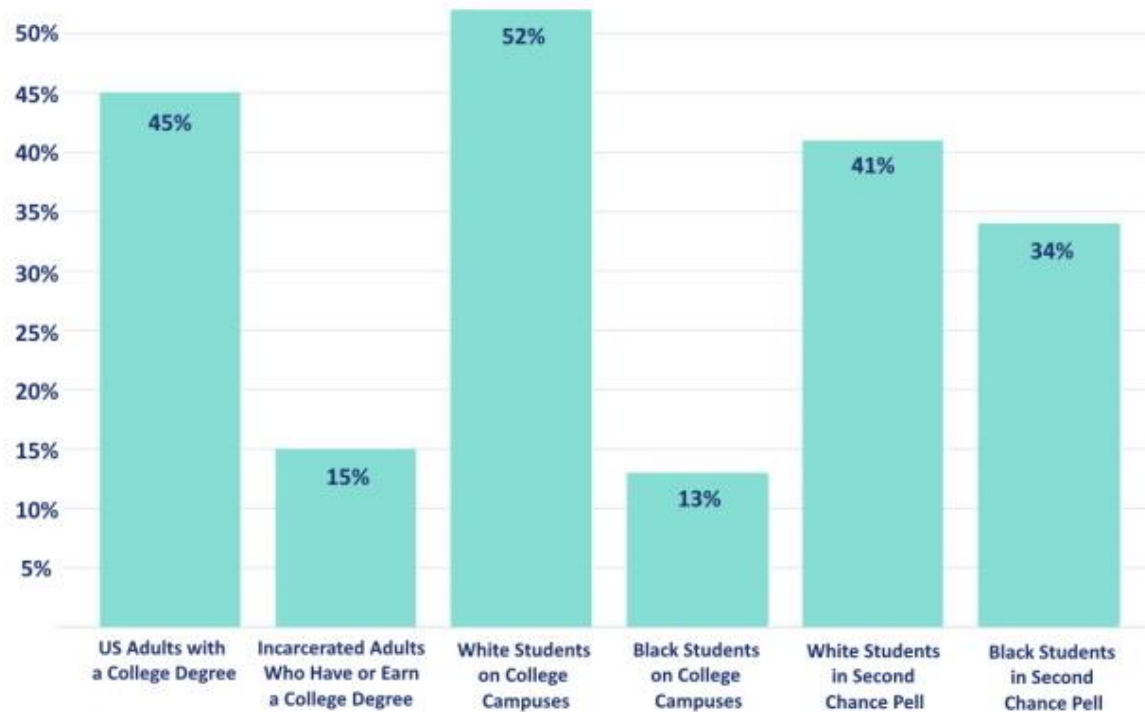
The incarcerated population was also among the demographics hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, facing higher rates of infections and deaths than the general US population. And like colleges across the country, prison education programs faced disruptions in 2020 that included cancellations and quick shifts to online delivery.

Below, data compiled from recent reports show how incarcerated people participated in higher education, before and during the pandemic.

Increasing Access for Incarcerated Students

- While more than half of incarcerated people have a high school degree or equivalent credential, making them qualified to enroll in college courses, just 15 percent finish a college degree or certificate “either prior to or during incarceration,” [according to New America](#).
- In comparison, 45 percent of adults in the general US population have finished a higher education degree or certificate.
- To expand access to college programs, the US Department of Education established the Second Chance Pell program in 2016 to provide financial assistance that helps incarcerated students enroll in college.
- As of 2020, 130 colleges from 42 states and Washington, DC, were participating in the program. More than 22,000 incarcerated students took courses and at least 7,000 students earned an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or other postsecondary credentials through the program.
- Black students enroll in Second Chance Pell programs at a rate that is “nearly 2.5 times higher than on college campuses” (34 percent compared with 13 percent), according to a [new report from the Vera Institute of Justice](#).
- However, Second Chance Pell students are still disproportionately White compared to the overall prison population (41 percent and 31 percent, respectively).

Higher Education and the Criminal Justice System



Data compiled from New America and Vera Institute for Justice.

Personal and Societal Benefits of College while Incarcerated

- People who participate in education programs while incarcerated are 28 percent less likely to recidivate than those who do not participate in correctional education programs, according to an [analysis of thirty-seven years of research](#).
- Providing incarcerated people with a college degree is crucial for ensuring their ability to secure employment. By 2027, up to 70 percent of US jobs will require at least some education beyond high school, according to [estimates](#) from Georgetown University's Center for Education and the Workforce (CEW).
- In a [recent report](#), CEW estimates that making higher education more accessible for low-income people and people of color would add up to nearly a trillion dollars in societal benefits each year, including increases in earnings, taxes, and spending.
- As part of these benefits, "increased educational attainment could correspond with a \$13.8 billion annual reduction in public costs by reducing the number of incarcerated individuals," the CEW report says.

Higher Education in Prison during COVID-19

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, prisons, jails, and other detention centers were "among the nation's most dangerous places," [according to the New York Times](#). As of April 2021, the virus had killed an average of seven inmates a day since the start of the pandemic.

- COVID-19 required rapid changes to prison education programs. According to the Vera Institute report, “Unique constraints within prisons, such as movement restrictions and safety concerns, caused major disruptions in education delivery. Additionally, technology limitations in many prisons prevented programs from quickly shifting to distance learning and hybrid modalities.”
- Despite these challenges in 2020, a relatively small percentage of prison education programs had to cancel their programs in the spring (14 percent) and fall (17 percent) semesters, the report found.
- Instead, most programs found ways to modify their programs (63 percent in spring and 61 percent in fall), while many were able to continue their previous instructional methods without modification (24 percent and 22 percent, respectively).
- While 78 percent of Second Chance Pell programs used face-to-face instruction before the pandemic, nearly as many (75 percent) delivered instruction remotely (asynchronously, synchronously, or in a hybrid format) during the pandemic.
- As the pandemic hopefully nears its end, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of programs are planning on returning to normal, face-to-face instruction when it is safe to do so.

PLACEHOLDER

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