



## HIGHER EDUCATION AS A RE-ENTRY PATHWAY

Higher education can be a valuable pathway to deter criminal re-offense as expanded educational horizons allow justice-impacted individuals to find quality jobs, while easing the overall reintegration process. Despite this positive impact, access to higher educational resources is often hindered by a host of financial, social, and systemic barriers, which make it difficult for individuals with records to further their education and earn post-secondary degrees.

### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG JUSTICE-IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS

Justice-impacted individuals with a history of incarceration face substantial and persistent educational disparities that hinder their successful reentry into society. As Figure 1 presents, over half of these individuals possess only a high school diploma or GED and a full quarter lack any formal education credential, nearly twice the rate of the general public. Disparities in four-year degree attainment are especially pronounced, with less than 5% of individuals with a history of incarceration earning at least a Bachelor's, relative to nearly 30% of the general public.

There are many organizations in the IE that support justice impacted individuals in their pursuit of higher education. The Presley Center spoke with leadership from six of these organizations and incorporate their insight throughout this bulletin.

Although GED programs in prisons contribute to reduced educational disparities, they are rarely documented to lead to further educational advancement; less than 10% of individuals who receive a GED while incarcerated pursue any further education and less than 1% earn a 4-year degree.<sup>i</sup> Further, the quality of education received through in-prison education programs is not standardized and often at the forefront of budget cuts.<sup>ii</sup> When offered, in-prison education is often disconnected to outside experience or opportunities for application, which can lead students to feel discouraged or apathy towards future educational pathways.<sup>iii</sup> Programs that make use of enactive mastery experiences—which allow participants the ability to affirm their capabilities through direct action and work—are more effective in encouraging continued education and positively influencing feelings of self-efficacy.

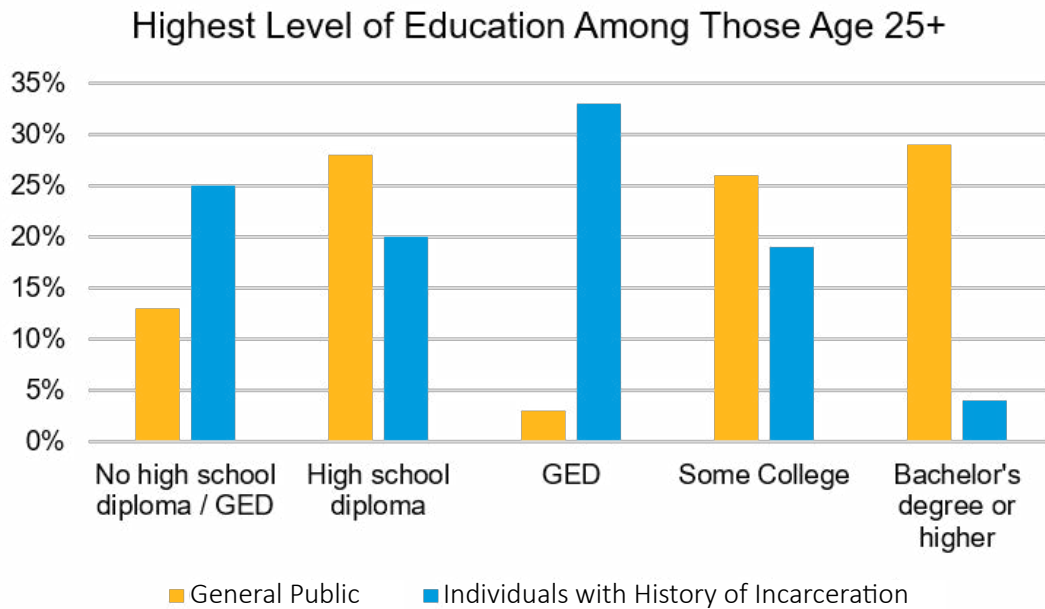


FIGURE 1. Prison Policy Institute

Despite in-prison education and training, educational deficits among those exiting incarceration persist, which underscores the importance of strong prison-to-school pathways to help support justice-involved individuals during reentry to reap the benefits of education post-release.

### THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION ON EMPLOYMENT AND RECIDIVISM

As the labor market becomes increasingly competitive, holding a college degree has become important as a symbol of the desired basic qualifications for many applicants.<sup>iv</sup> Figure 2 highlights individuals with a history of incarceration experience higher levels of unemployment than the general public, and that the effect of incarceration on employment is experienced differently across race and gender. Although education does not mitigate the effect of incarceration on

employment, it does decrease unemployment rates across demographic groups.<sup>v</sup>

In addition to the positive effects of education on employment, numerous studies show that higher education helps decrease the likelihood of re-offense. One such study found that education's rehabilitative properties led to a 13-29% drop in key recidivism metrics (rearrests, reconvictions, reincarceration), with the secondary benefit of decreasing prison spending due to reincarceration by an estimated \$2 for every \$1 put towards education for justice-impacted individuals.<sup>vi</sup> Lowered recidivism rates have major economic benefits with regards to decreased spending for prison systems, suggesting increased educational attainment among justice-involved individuals could save taxpayers money, improve the earning potential of justice-impacted individuals, and improve the living conditions of those currently incarcerated.<sup>vii</sup>

## Unemployment Rates among General Public and Individuals with History of Incarceration, by Race, Gender, & Education

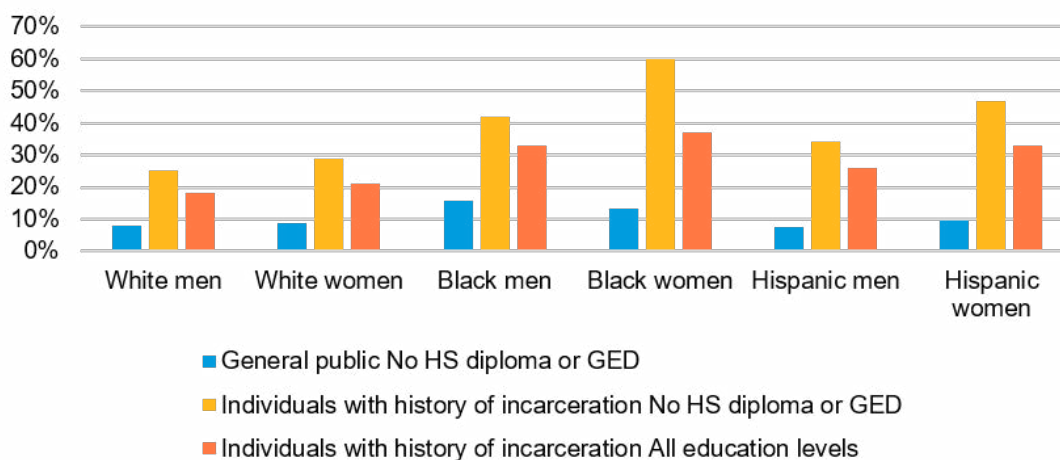


FIGURE 2. Prison Policy Institute

### HIGHER EDUCATION AS A POST-RELEASE PATHWAY

Given the roughly 700,000 formerly incarcerated Americans who return home every year and 4.9 million under supervised release,<sup>viii</sup> many individuals stand to gain from equitable access to the educational and career opportunities that come with higher education.

A swift transition between prison and college is integral to the success of higher education in reducing recidivism. Re-entry after extended periods of incarceration makes it difficult for the individual to resume existence in a world that seems to have moved on, with a relevant study noting: “It’s an ongoing process of navigating public and private identities, of moving through a maze of new technologies and learning code words”.<sup>ix</sup> This struggle to adapt to a new world helps us understand why nearly 4 out of 10 men return to prison within three years of release, but pursuing higher

education during this crucial period can help.<sup>x</sup>

Despite the considerable benefits of higher education, formerly incarcerated and system-impacted individuals face significant barriers to accessing these opportunities – especially during re-entry. These barriers include financial constraints, social stigma, bias, and sometimes institutional barriers within the education system.

### RISING SCHOLARS

Riverside City College’s Rising Scholars Program is part of the California Community College System’s Rising Scholars Network and provides a supportive, empowering educational environment for students impacted by the carceral system through academic counseling, career assessments, peer support, and financial assistance, among other services.

[Learn More About Rising Scholars](#)

## FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND LACK OF INCOME

Justice-impacted individuals often struggle with the financial cost of education, which restricts their access to higher education. Higher education represents a significant cost in and of itself, but justice-impacted students frequently grapple with legal debts that “significantly contribute to social inequality and inhibits the ability to afford higher education”.<sup>xi</sup> Further, financial hardships are not equally distributed, with individuals who grew up in lower income households in urban neighborhoods being especially likely to report bearing financial burdens for themselves and family members. This dynamic is closely tied to race, with African American men, African American women, and Hispanic men being especially likely to report finances are a hindrance to equitable higher education access post-incarceration.<sup>xii</sup> Hernandez, Murillo, and Britton highlight that many Latinx students with conviction histories must leverage their “hustle” to navigate financial barriers, often leaning on pre-college skills and life experiences to seek academic and financial resources.<sup>xiii</sup>

### STARTING OVER, INC.

Starting Over, Inc. is led by formerly incarcerated individuals and provides transitional housing, case management, peer support, employment services, and legal aid to support individuals during the reentry process as they work toward their self-determined goals.

[Learn More About Starting Over, Inc.](#)

## SOCIAL STIGMA AND BIAS

Social stigma and bias produce another challenging barrier for justice-impacted students to overcome. Stigma against justice-impacted individuals manifests in various forms, from individual biases to systemic exclusion from participation in certain aspects of higher education (e.g. housing, etc.). Hernandez et al. note that these students often face and adapt to these challenges by cultivating a strong sense of community and teamwork, refusing to be defined by their past.<sup>xiv</sup> Uggen’s work on social stigma further elaborates on how “societal perceptions can hinder opportunities for those with conviction histories,” producing a significant barrier to their educational aspirations.<sup>xv</sup> Related, Abeyta also emphasizes that formerly incarcerated Latino men face social stigma that impacts their sense of belonging and self-worth, which complicates their educational journey as they grapple with navigating a world laden with biases against them.<sup>xvi</sup>

## INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Within the educational system, Stewart’s insights on institutional barriers note that “many universities and colleges hold admission procedures that implicitly exclude justice-impacted students.” These procedures are often rooted in systemic and exclusionary practices that require these students to disclose their criminal history as part of the academic or housing application process and subsequently prove their value.<sup>xvii</sup> Hernandez et al. also highlight the need for a drastic reimagining of academic approaches to make them more inclusive,

suggesting that “current gradual reforms are insufficient in addressing the systemic biases against students with conviction histories”.<sup>xviii</sup> Abeyta concurs, citing that institutional barriers such as the absence of remedial education and supportive services make it challenging for formerly incarcerated individuals to succeed in college.<sup>xix</sup>

Collectively, these barriers form a challenging landscape for justice-impacted individuals pursuing higher education, and require both systemic changes and individual resilience to overcome.

### **OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE INLAND EMPIRE: SUPPORT FROM NON-PROFITS & INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Strong pipelines from incarceration to education can provide support for higher educational success and many non-profit organizations, as well as departments and initiatives embedded within colleges and universities, are vital to bridging the gap between these institutional settings. The Presley Center interviewed a sample of organizations in the Inland Empire that provide this type of support—inside and outside of higher education institutions—to learn more about the programs and services that aid justice-impacted individuals in the region on their path to attaining their educational goals.

### **EARLY INTERVENTION**

In some instances, community support can begin while the individual is still incarcerated. Operation New Hope is a non-profit based in

San Bernardino County that provides direct (e.g. educational, training, and employment) and supportive (e.g. cognitive-behavioral therapy, housing connections, etc.) services to justice-impacted individuals, before and after release. This approach also improves awareness of available services through word-of-mouth, allows incarcerated individuals to envision a post-release plan for their life, and helps to build a greater sense of trust with the Inland Empire community, which has only been further built up over the last several decades.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **PROJECT REBOUND**

Project Rebound at CSUSB is part of the larger CSU Project Rebound program and seeks to admit full-time, justice-impacted students pursuing a Baccalaureate or Master’s degree, and support their education by helping students meet their basic needs through resources and connections to supportive organizations in the community.

[Learn More About Project Rebound](#)

### **EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT**

Dr. Adrienne Grayson, Associate Dean of Educational Partnerships at Riverside City College’s Rising Scholars, emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive on-campus, educational environment to help combat the social stigma and bias that formerly incarcerated students face. “Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment on campus is crucial,” and includes developing “tailored programming that addresses the specific academic and social needs of the students” and having justice-impacted

individuals in staff and peer-advising roles. This includes strategies such as establishing peer-to-peer support networks so justice-impacted students can share their experience and strategies with their peers, increasing the visibility of the program on-campus to ensure as many students as possible have access, and conducting outreach to the campus community to educate faculty, staff, and non-impacted students about the challenges justice-involved students face and ways they can support them.

### OPERATION NEW HOPE

Operation New Hope is a 501(c)(3) in San Bernardino County that strives to support youth and young adults through case management, educational and training opportunities, leadership development, and a career pathways program.

[Learn More About Operation New Hope](#)

### HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Often providing educational services is often insufficient, so many organizations take a holistic approach to supporting educational attainment. For example, Starting Over Inc. also provides resources to make re-entry easier, such as access to transitory housing or general case management services as formerly incarcerated participants reacclimate to life beyond prison. <sup>xxi</sup>

Dr. Annika Anderson, Executive Director of Project Rebound and Associate Professor of Sociology at CSU San Bernardino,

notes her organization strives to address the severe financial barriers that justice-involved individuals face when pursuing higher education. “We assist with financial aid, housing, and basic needs such as food and transportation.”<sup>xxii</sup> Project Rebound supports its student population by ensuring they have help in navigating campus resources and bureaucratic processes, which can be complex and may dissuade individuals from continuing their education without such academic and personal support.

Similarly, Ismael Davila, Director of the Underground Scholars program at UC Riverside, also highlights the importance of supportive services in promoting successful educational outcomes: “there needs to be legislation that guarantees housing on campus for formerly incarcerated students.”. In his opinion, legislative advocacy is a key strategy to push for policies that provide comprehensive support for formerly incarcerated students and ultimately create more inclusive environments within higher education by recognizing and attempting to mitigate the unique challenges faced by this student population.

### SUCCESS BEYOND HIGHER EDUCATION

The value of higher education in preventing recidivism is well-documented. It provides formerly incarcerated individuals with the skills and credentials that helps them secure stable employment and reduces the likelihood of reoffending. With the support of services like those profiled above, many resilient justice-impacted students are able to be successful in higher education, but the barriers faced due to the mark of a criminal record often persist after graduation. Fidel

## UNDERGROUND SCHOLARS

Underground Scholars at UCR is part of the UC-wide Underground Scholars network, and strives to build a prison-to-school pipeline through student recruitment, retention, and advocacy efforts. Services include counseling and psychological services, academic support, financial resources, and assistance with basic needs through UCR programs and connection with outside service providers.

[Learn More About Underground Scholars](#)

Chagolla (Starting Over, Inc.) underscores the discouraging effect of seemingly never-ending barriers to full societal reintegration:

“A lot of the time we hear “Why don’t [justice-impacted individuals] get a job? Why don’t they just get higher education? Why don’t they get a certificate of rehabilitation”? Well, what happens when we get all that and we’re still not able to access any of these opportunities that are out here for folks?... if you wanna talk about recidivism rates, that is your answer right there.”

Thus, it is important to remember that addressing barriers to higher education is not a silver bullet, but one part of the larger reentry puzzle. While investments in higher education and supportive services for this population are helpful in improving employment and reducing recidivism, broader, societal changes are required to allow justice-impacted individuals to fully reintegrate into society.



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