

**Education as Crime Prevention:  
The Case for Reinstating Pell Grant Eligibility for the Incarcerated**

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## Table of Contents

1	<b>Executive Summary</b>
2	<b>Education and Crime</b>
3	<b>Education as Crime Prevention: The Impact of Education on Recidivism</b>
4	<b>Pell Grants and the Prison System</b>
5	<b>Efficiencies: A Cost - Benefit Analysis</b>
6	<b>Table of Appendices</b>

## Appendices

A	“Review of Various Outcome Studies Relating Prison Education To Reduced Recidivism,” Tracy et al., Windham School System, State of Texas, 1994.
B	<a href="#"><u>“Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn’t, What’s Promising,” Sherman et al., Research in Brief, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, 1998-2003.</u></a>
C	<a href="#"><u>“Impact of Educational Achievement of Inmates in the Windham School District on Recidivism,” Criminal Justice Policy Council, State of Texas, August 2000.</u></a>
D	<a href="#"><u>“The Three State Recidivism Study,” Steurer et al., U.S. Department of Education, Office of Correctional Education, 1999.</u></a>
E	“Division of Continuing Education Post-Secondary Program Executive Summary,” January 2000, Windham School District, Texas Department of Criminal Justice.
F	“Division of Continuing Education Post-Secondary Programs Executive Summary,” November 2002, Windham School District, Texas Department of Criminal Justice.
G	<a href="#"><u>“Prison Education Program Participation and Recidivism: A Test of the Normalization Hypothesis,” Miles D. Harer, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation, May, 1995.</u></a>
H	“Executive Summary: The Positive Impact of Corrections Education on Recidivism and Employment,” Illinois Department of Corrections, 1997.
I	“Pell Grants for Prisoners: Facts/Commentary,” U.S. Department of Education, Office of Correctional Education 1995.
J	General Accounting Office/ Health, Education and Human Services Division, August 5, 1994 to Senator Harris Wofford, GAO/HEHS-94-224R Pell Grants for Prison Inmates
K	<a href="#"><u>“Return on Investment for Correctional Education in Florida,” (based on a study conducted by TaxWatch and the Center for Needs Assessment &amp; Planning), June 1999, Florida Department of Corrections, Bureau of Research and Data Analysis. Reproduced along with first and second Year follow-up data prepared by the Florida Department of Corrections.</u></a>

## Executive Summary

**This report illustrates the overwhelming consensus among public officials that postsecondary education is the most successful and cost-effective method of preventing crime. The United States Government should resume its long-standing policy of releasing a fraction of Pell Grants to qualified incarcerated Americans. As proven by the government studies cited in this memo, its impact was enormously positive. Resuming this policy would slash rates of recidivism and save the states millions of dollars.**

**Note. The data cited in this memo comes *exclusively* from official publications produced by or for the United States Government and the governments of the states.**

## 2 Education and Recidivism

Nearly one and a half million individuals are housed in adult correctional facilities in the United States. The United States Department of Justice reports that "the typical offender is undereducated, unemployed and living in poverty before incarceration."<sup>1</sup>

Inside our prisons, 19% percent of adult inmates are illiterate, and up to 60% are functionally illiterate. In contrast to this, our national adult illiteracy rate stands at 4%, with up to 23% functionally illiterate.<sup>2</sup>

Social, psychological, and demographic factors correlate powerfully with recidivism. Most persons are released from prison into the community unskilled, undereducated, and highly likely to become involved in crime again. Rates of recidivism in the United States are extraordinarily high, ranging from 41% to 71%.<sup>3</sup>

## 3 Education as Crime Prevention: The Impact of Education on Recidivism

Prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism.

According to the National Institute of Justice Report to the U.S. Congress, prison education is far more effective at reducing recidivism than boot camps,<sup>4</sup> shock incarceration,<sup>5</sup> or vocational training.<sup>6</sup>

In 1997, The Correctional Education Association conducted "The Three State Recidivism Study" for the United States Department of Education. Over 3600 persons, released more than three years earlier, were involved in a longitudinal study in Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio. Using education participation as the major variable, the study shows that "simply attending school behind bars reduces the likelihood of reincarceration by 29%. Translated into savings, every dollar spent on education returned more than two dollars to the citizens in reduced prison costs."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Review of Various Outcome Studies Relating Prison Education to Reduced Recidivism," Tracy and Johnson. State of Texas, Windham School System (June 1994). This report is reproduced below as **Appendix A**.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (1992). *1992 National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, DC: Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Harer, M.D. (1994). *Recidivism Among Federal Prisoners Released in 1987*. Washington, D.C: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research Evaluation, pp.2-13. Available online at [www.bop.gov/orepg/orepprecid87.pdf](http://www.bop.gov/orepg/orepprecid87.pdf), See also Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1997) *Criminal Offender Statistics*. Available online at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Sherman, et.al. "Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising," Report prepared for the National Institute of Justice under Grant Number 96MUMU0019. This report is reproduced below as **Appendix B** (see p.9).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Impact of Educational Achievement of Inmates in the Windham School District on Recidivism, State of Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council, August 2000. This report is reproduced below as **Appendix C** (see Ch. IV).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "The Three State Recidivism Study". Steurer, Smith and Tracy, 1997. This Report is reproduced below as **Appendix D** (see p.1).

In addition to this three-state study, the U.S. Department of Education has released a summary of diverse programs across the country entitled "'Review of Various Outcome Studies Relating Prison Education to Reduced Recidivism.'"<sup>8</sup> These programs also reported a consistent positive relationship between participation, educational attainment and lowered rates of recidivism.

Included in the Department's summary was the 1994 State of Texas report from the Windham School District. The State of Texas found "a 20% lowered recidivism for those who received a GED certificate and completed a vocational training."<sup>9</sup>

Most strikingly, the State of 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%).<sup>10</sup>

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice has released studies focusing exclusively on postsecondary correctional education.<sup>11</sup> The Department's Report of August, 2000 was based on post-release data for 883 offenders who received college degrees while incarcerated between 1986 and 1992. While the 1994 study covered three years out, this report covered a period as long as eight years after release. Compared to a system-wide recidivism rate of 43%, prisoners who completed an Associate's Degree recidivated at the rate of 27.2% and those who completed a Baccalaureate Degree recidivated at the rate of 7.8%.<sup>12</sup>

In its Executive Summary, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice also noted studies in Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Alabama, Wisconsin and New York that showed a "clear and fairly consistent correlation" between completion of collegiate studies and reduction in recidivism.<sup>13</sup>

Over the years, increasingly sophisticated statistical tools have been used to control for prior educational level, age, commitment offence, post-release employment and self-selection: factors that might dilute the finding that education slashes rates of recidivism. The results remain utterly compelling.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Review of Various Outcome Studies Relating Prison Education to Reduced Recidivism," Tracy et al., Windham School System, State of Texas, 1994. See **Appendix A**.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, p.5

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> "Division of Continuing Education Post-Secondary Program Executive Summary," January 2000, November 2002, Windham School District, Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Reproduced below as **Appendix E** and **Appendix F**.

<sup>12</sup> See **Appendix E, p.4**

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the Department of Justice, FBP research cited below at note 15, see also Duguid, Stephen, "The Demise of University Education in Canada's Prisons," *Journal of Correctional Education*, Vol.48, Issue 2, June 1997, pp.56-68; and see Batiuk, M.E., P. Moke, "Education in Ohio Prisons: An Analysis of Recidivism Rates," (unpublished research paper) and see Batiuk and Moke, "Crime and Rehabilitation: Correctional Education as an Agent of Change – A Research Note," *Justice Quarterly*, Vol.14, No.1, March 1997.

An analysis conducted on behalf of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons finds that the positive effect of post-secondary education is independent of these factors. Most striking is the Bureau's finding that lower rates of recidivism are independent of post-release employment, and its conclusion that this is attributable to the "normalizing" effects of education itself.<sup>15</sup>

Other studies sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Prisons find that recidivism rates are inversely related to educational program participation while in prison. The more educational programs successfully completed for each 6 months confined, the lower the recidivism rates.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the State of Illinois has also released a highly refined recidivism study conducted in 1997 by the Illinois Department of Corrections. Illinois found that their postsecondary correctional education programs yielded a recidivism rate of 13.1%, as contrasted to a control group's rate of 37.5%, and the general prison population rate of 39.2%.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4 Pell Grants, the Prison System, and The U.S. Department of Education**

In 1965, Congress passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which permitted inmates to apply for financial aid in the form of Pell Grants to attend college. By 1982, there were more than 350 college programs available in 90% of the States.

Numerous studies were conducted to evaluate these programs [*see above*]. Success was measured by the rate of re-arrest and the offender's ability to maintain employment upon release. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Higher education prevented people from returning to crime, and transformed them into skilled workers who contribute to the economy.

In the 1990s, elected officials began introducing legislation to prohibit tuition assistance to inmates. The United States Department of Education resisted this change of policy, and continued to support the use of Pell grants in America's prisons.

As part of this effort, the Department's Office of Correctional Education issued a Facts and Commentary in 1995 entitled "Pell Grants for Prisoners," in which it stated that "Pell grants help inmates obtain the skills and education needed to acquire and keep a job following their eventual release."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Department published the following facts in support of Pell eligibility for the incarcerated:<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Prison Education Program Participation and Recidivism: A Test of the Normalization Hypothesis," Miles D. Harer, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation, May, 1995. Included below as ***Appendix G***.

<sup>16</sup> "Recidivism Among Federal Prisoners Released in 1987," Miles D. Harer, Federal Bureau Of Prisons, Office of Research & Evaluation, 1994. Available online at [www.bop.gov/orepg/oreprecid87.pdf](http://www.bop.gov/orepg/oreprecid87.pdf), p.4

<sup>17</sup> "Executive Summary and Excerpts from The Positive Impact of Corrections Education on Recidivism and Employment," Illinois Department of Corrections, 1997. Included below as ***Appendix H, p. 4***.

<sup>18</sup> "Pell Grants for Prisoners: Facts/Commentary," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Correctional Education 1995. Included below as ***Appendix I***.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

- Of the \$5.3 billion awarded in Pell grants in 1993, about \$34 million were awarded to inmates. This represents *less than 1/10 of one percent (1%)* of the total grant awards.
- The annual Pell grant awarded per inmate was less than \$1,300.
- Pell grants are given to education providers, *not* to inmates, to pay for the inmates' educational expenses.
- Death row inmates and inmates serving life sentences without parole were *not* eligible for Pell grants.

Despite the position of policy experts within the federal and state government, including both educators and correctional officials, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act effectively dismantled correctional higher education.

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.

## **5 Cost Efficiencies: A Cost-Benefit Analysis Case Study**

Many of the federal and state government studies of recidivism and correctional education have included a particular focus on the cost-savings of such programs compared to other forms of crime prevention.

For example, The U.S. Department of Education's "Three State Recidivism Study" of 1997 drew particular attention to the tremendous cost-savings per dollar spent on such programs. As noted above, according to the Correctional Education Association's study sponsored by the Department, every dollar spent on education returned more than two dollars to the citizens in reduced prison costs.<sup>21</sup>

A far more detailed cost-benefit analysis has been carried out in the State of Florida. Using the Costs Consequences Analysis model developed by TaxWatch (FTW), and the Florida State University Center for Needs Assessment & Planning (CNAP), adapted by the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC), FTW and CNAP examined FDC educational programs to

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<sup>20</sup> In addition to the Windham School District referred to above, the State of Texas has an extensive post-secondary program operated within its Department of Corrections. For a brief introduction to the Division of Continuing Education operating in conjunction with TDCJ, see "Division of Continuing Education Post-Secondary Program: Executive Summary". These Executive Summaries include, among other things, updated recidivism data for the years 2000 and 2002. See **Appendix E** and **Appendix F**.

<sup>21</sup> "The Three State Recidivism Study," U.S. Department of Education, p.3. See [\*Appendix D\*](#).

study returns on public investment in job training and education programs conducted by the FDC.<sup>22</sup>

Among the study results was the finding that *all* sub-groups of Correctional Education completers for FY 1993-4 had positive return on investment ratios.

The combined Costs-Consequences Analysis ratio reported at \$1.66 return for every \$1.00 invested.

The highest return was for academic completers, with \$3.53 returned for \$1.00 of public investment.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This report illustrates the overwhelming consensus among public officials that post-secondary education is the most successful and cost-effective method of preventing crime. As proven by the government studies cited in this memo, the public-safety and economic impact of correctional education is enormous. In the past these profoundly positive effects were widespread even though such grants accounted for roughly one-half of 1% of total Pell investments.<sup>24</sup> The cost-effectiveness of this policy is manifest, and has been detailed in officially recognized cost-benefit analyses.

The United States Government should resume its policy of releasing a fraction of Pell Grants to qualified incarcerated Americans. An extremely modest public investment would create a massive response from private, non-profit educational and religious organizations. Such a policy would sharply cut rates of recidivism and save the states millions of dollars.

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<sup>22</sup> “Return on Investment for Correctional Education in Florida,” (based on a study conducted by TaxWatch and the Center for Needs Assessment & Planning), June 1999, Florida Department of Corrections, Bureau of Research and Data Analysis. Reproduced (along with first and second Year follow-up data prepared by the Florida Department of Corrections) below as [\*Appendix K\*](#).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at p.2

<sup>24</sup> “Pell Grants for Prisoners: Facts/Commentary,” U.S. Department of Education, Office of Correctional Education 1995, *see also* General Accounting Office/ Health, Education and Human Services Division, August 5, 1994 to Senator Harris Wofford, GAO/HEHS-94-224R Pell Grants for Prison Inmates, below as [\*Appendix J\*](#)