

Increasing higher education funding for incarcerated people can advance racial equity

By Richard Davis Jr., State Policy Fellow

After nearly 30 years of unjustly denying access, the federal government [is set to fully restore](#) Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated students. The Pell grant program offers the opportunity of higher education to eligible students who demonstrate financial need. A critical tool for expanding college access, Pell grants have supported the educational needs of low-income students for more than 55 years.

This long-overdue policy change is promising news for Louisiana, a state notorious for its high rate of incarceration that disproportionately impacts Black people. But it's only a first step. Opening the door to more opportunities for higher education in prison will take a coordinated and intentional approach over the next few years. While the full restoration of eligibility is not expected until 2023, Louisiana can and should take steps to ensure racial equity is prioritized for one of our state's most marginalized populations.

BACKGROUND OF THE BAN

In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton signed a comprehensive "anti-crime" bill - the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act - which banned incarcerated adults from receiving Pell grants to help pay for college. In doing so, the federal government took away an important opportunity that people with criminal convictions could use to prepare themselves for life after prison. Higher education is proven to reduce recidivism, which reduces long-term incarceration costs.

The effects of this change were sadly predictable. According to [research by the RAND Corporation](#), the percentage of incarcerated students participating in postsecondary education programs dropped by half - from 14% in 1991 to just 7% in 2004. The percentage of state prisons offering college courses also decreased from 30% in 1995 to 26% in 2000.

After years of pressure from education and prison rights advocates, the federal government took the first step in correcting the harm done by this detrimental decision, when the U.S. Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell in 2015. This pilot program has been [an overwhelming success](#), with approximately 17,000 students participating and over 4,500 degrees or certificates conferred between 2016 and 2020.

The success of the pilot program - and continued pressure from advocates - prompted [Congress to lift the ban](#) in December 2020. While the U.S. Department of Education is slowly taking steps to restore access to these federal funds by [inviting more institutions to participate](#) in the Second Chance Pell program; full restoration is not set to occur until 2023. This delay is due to the number of federal, state, and institutional regulations that will need to be established in order to stand up a high-quality and equitable aid system for these students, who are more susceptible to falling through the cracks and being taken advantage of by predatory institutions.

THE BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

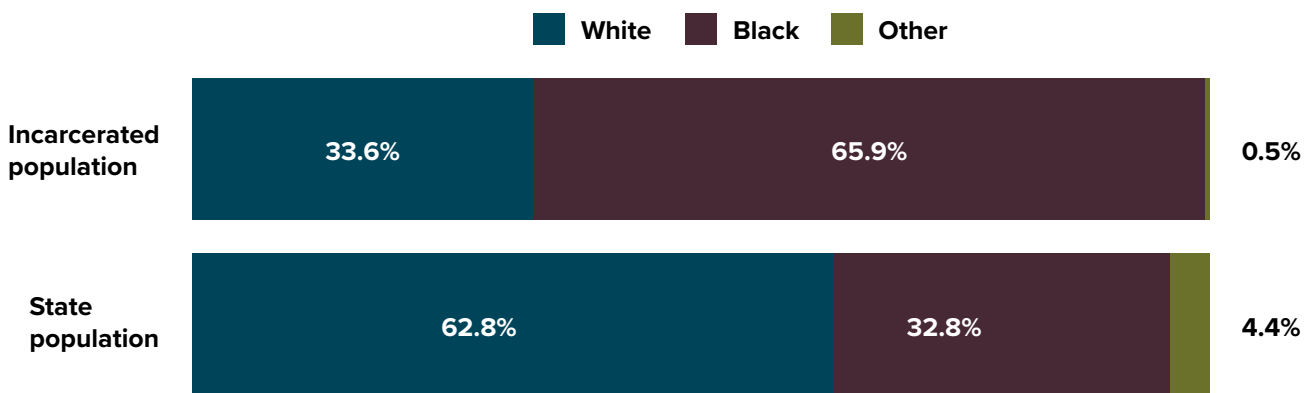
One of the main drivers behind this policy reversal was a recognition of the positive effects of offering higher education in prison. Studies have shown that people who participate in any form of education while incarcerated are [43% less likely](#) to return to prison. While returning citizens continue to face a number of barriers to employment, including [restrictive occupational licensing and a broken hiring process](#), educational attainment while in prison has been proven to lead to higher rates of employment and increased earnings upon release.

THE STATE OF INCARCERATION IN LOUISIANA

While sentencing reforms have reduced Louisiana’s prison population considerably in recent years, [the Pelican State still leads the country and the world in per-capita rates of incarceration](#). While more than 26,000 people continue to languish in Louisiana’s jails and prisons, the vast majority of these citizens will re-enter society at some point.

Meanwhile, years of institutionalized racism and the longstanding impacts of the school-to-prison pipeline have resulted in an overrepresentation of Black people in the state’s prisons and jails. While Black Louisianans make up 32.8% percent of the state’s population, they make up approximately 67% of Louisiana’s incarcerated population.

BLACK PEOPLE MAKE UP NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF LOUISIANA’S INCARCERATED POPULATION, DESPITE CONSTITUTING ONLY ONE-THIRD OF THE STATE’S POPULATION



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Louisiana Department of Corrections

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ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AND ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY

As states prepare to administer Pell grants to incarcerated people, an effective implementation will be vital to the program’s success. Last fall, the U.S. Department of Education began [developing guidelines](#) for how states can administer the program in ways that ensure incarcerated students get a quality education. While advocates were pleased to see the federal government solicit input on implementation of this new policy, there are numerous challenges that will need to be ironed out at the state level, such as:

- **Recruitment and eligibility screening for programs** - Given the small scope of the pilot program, this expanded eligibility has the potential to provide thousands of more students with the opportunity to further their education. To meet the expected demand, academic institutions and state departments

of corrections will need to implement comprehensive recruitment processes to ensure that incarcerated people know about these opportunities.

- **Effectively guiding these students through their respective education programs** - Academic and social support programs traditionally offered on college campuses will need to be replicated and tailored to meet the needs of incarcerated students, who will need heightened support.
- **Facilitating statewide articulation or transfer agreements for these students, in anticipation that they choose to continue their education following their release from the criminal-legal system** - Whether formerly incarcerated students want to finish the programs that they started or pursue an advanced degree, clear articulation or transfer agreements between colleges and universities will be critical to the number of options that these students have to advance their careers upon release.

While Louisiana should be focusing on these concerns, given the current racial demographics of the state's incarcerated population and its status as [the second-poorest state in the nation](#), there are two equally important steps that can and should be taken to prioritize racial equity:

- As more incarcerated students become eligible for Pell Grant funding, the state should monitor and address racial disparities in enrollment and completion of postsecondary education programs. This data should also be publically available in a highly visible space, such as the Department of Corrections' new [Demographic Dashboard](#).
- Given that there will be unmet need and increased interest among incarcerated students in postsecondary education programs, the state should explore ways to utilize [state need-based aid, such as GO Grants](#) to further support these students.