



Justice-system impacted students

May 2025

Background

Justice-system impacted students include any (potential) students who have had or are having their lives significantly impacted either through incarceration, legal involvement, or family connections. Justice-system impacted students bring valuable knowledge, skills, and assets to higher education settings. However, these students must navigate significant barriers, including social stigma, systemic challenges related to admissions, financial aid (like the historical Pell Grant ban), and occupational licensing, despite the recognized benefits of postsecondary education for reentry and reducing recidivism. Effective strategies to support this population include dedicated campus programs and resources, employing anti-deficit approaches that acknowledge students' strengths, building robust partnerships and networks among educational institutions, criminal justice agencies, and community organizations, developing specific support tools like mentoring and academic preparation programs, advocating for policy changes to remove educational barriers, and leveraging the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in advocacy and program design. Furthermore, the research highlighted points to the need for more comprehensive data collection, particularly quantitative data on students' assets, and further study into their transitional needs and program effectiveness.

Key takeaways from the literature

1. Significant Barriers Persist: Students from this population face numerous, often compounding, barriers to college entry and completion. These include navigating social stigma, dealing with a deficiency of external resources, systemic challenges in the admissions process (such as criminal history screening), historical and ongoing issues with financial aid access (like the Pell Grant ban), and challenges related to occupational licensing restrictions after graduation. These systemic and personal challenges can be compounded by racial, ethnic, and socio-economic factors. Justice-impacted students also report feeling ill-prepared for navigating interpersonal relationships on campus after incarceration.

2. Valuable Assets and Strengths are Brought to Campus: Countering deficit perspectives, this population brings significant knowledge, skills, and abilities to educational settings. This includes knowledge acquired through lived experiences, skills utilized to navigate challenging systems, resilience, and other positive attributes. One study specifically found that justice-impacted individuals' presence on the campus can also challenge negative stereotypes and stigma.



3. Postsecondary Education Provides Substantial Benefits: Pursuing higher education, both during and after incarceration, offers significant positive impacts for both individuals and the community. These benefits include reducing recidivism rates, improving post-release outcomes, aiding in healthy community reentry, enhancing self-confidence and critical thinking skills, fostering improved interpersonal relationships, and developing transformative leadership capacity.

4. Effective Support Requires Specialized Programs and Anti-Deficit Approaches: Successful navigation of postsecondary systems by justice-impacted students requires consistent and steady support, often best provided through specialized campus programs. These programs should utilize anti-deficit lenses that recognize and build upon students' inherent strengths and cultural wealth. Key support strategies identified include peer mentorship, which offers encouragement, inclusion, and social capital, and academic preparation programs.

5. Systemic Change and Collaboration are Crucial: Addressing the challenges faced by this population requires working beyond individual support to impact institutions and policies. This involves building robust partnerships and networks among educational institutions, criminal justice agencies, and community organizations. Advocacy efforts are needed to change restrictive policies, such as fully restoring Pell Grant eligibility and removing other educational barriers.

6. More Comprehensive Research is Needed: Despite existing qualitative work, there is a significant need for more in-depth study of this population, particularly quantitative research to robustly measure assets and program effectiveness. Future research should also explore transitional needs from incarceration through different levels of education, examine the experiences of staff working with this population (especially those with lived experience), and analyze program outcomes like retention and graduation rates quantitatively.

Possible associated interventions/activities

There are a range of research-supported interventions that can be deployed to support justice-system impacted students:

1. Establish Dedicated Campus-Based Support Programs: Create specialized programs designed specifically for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. These programs serve as a primary avenue of support during their transition to higher education. These programs should provide a continuum of support services including matriculation assistance, help navigating the college process, admissions assistance, and connections to resources for overall well-being and basic needs.



2. **Address Systemic and Institutional Barriers:** Actively work to reduce or eliminate institutional barriers to enrollment and persistence. This includes banning the box on college admissions applications, ensuring access to financial aid programs beyond Pell Grants, such as state aid, and providing guidance on applying for various funding sources. Advocate for and help students navigate complex systems related to admissions, financial aid, and obtaining necessary documents lost during incarceration.
3. **Counseling and mentoring:** Offer academic services such as **academic counseling**, tutoring (including peer tutors), seminars/workshops, and assistance with academic planning. **Peer mentorship programs** should connect current students with those who have navigated similar challenges, offering encouragement, guidance, and social capital.
4. **College Readiness:** Develop **college readiness programs**, particularly for students transitioning from GED programs, that include academic content, skills-building, and socialization to the college context.
5. **Spaces and communities:** Create supportive spaces and communities where students can feel comfortable sharing their experiences and build a sense of belonging.
6. **Support Career Development and Reentry:** Provide **informed career counseling** that addresses potential employment barriers for individuals with conviction histories, such as licensing restrictions. Connect students with legal services for assistance with background checks, record clearing, and appealing denials. **Collaborate with community-based reentry organizations** to connect students with essential services like housing, employment, and financial literacy support.
7. **Invest in Professional Development and Campus Culture:** Offer **professional development training** for administrators, faculty, and staff to increase awareness and understanding of the experiences and needs of justice-impacted students, using anti-deficit and critical lenses. This training can include implicit bias and ally training. Work to **combat negative attitudes and stigma** on campus through education and awareness efforts.
8. **Foster Collaboration and Partnerships:** Build strong relationships and **partnerships with criminal justice agencies**, community organizations, and other educational institutions (including four-year universities) to create seamless educational pathways and support networks for students transitioning from incarceration to the community.

9. **Reevaluate Hiring Practices:** Consider reviewing and **reevaluating hiring practices** related to conviction history and actively seek to employ formerly incarcerated individuals within the institution's administration, faculty, and staff to provide representation and valuable lived experience.

Related metrics and indicators:

Educational institutions can measure the success of initiatives supporting justice-impacted students through a variety of indicators and metrics that capture outcomes at the individual, program, and systemic levels:

1. Academic Success and Persistence: This is a primary focus of higher education programs. Metrics include:

- **Enrollment numbers:** tracking how many justice-impacted individuals access college programs.
- **College readiness or preparation success:** assessing performance in bridge programs or academic preparation courses.
- **Course completion rates, academic performance (GPA), and credits accumulated:** indicating academic progress once enrolled.
- **Persistence rates**, such as semester-to-semester retention, or a broader measure like **educational years completed**, which reflect students' ability to continue their studies.
- **Graduation rates** (attainment of degrees or certificates): representing successful completion of educational goals.
- **Transfer rates** to four-year institutions¹⁵, for students pursuing bachelor's degrees.

2. Reentry and Life Outcomes: Given the population served, successful reentry and stability are crucial outcomes. Metrics include:

- **Recidivism rates** (return to incarceration) with successful programs showing significantly lower rates compared to baseline data.
- **Employment outcomes**, such as securing and retaining jobs, reflecting improved economic mobility and successful integration into the workforce.
- **Income levels**, indicating enhanced financial stability after educational attainment.
- **Housing stability**, a metric tracking progress towards healthy community reentry more broadly.

3. Personal Development and Well-being: Education can have significant impacts on individuals' internal states and relationships. Metrics can include:

- Changes in **self-confidence** and **self-esteem**.
- Measures of **social, emotional, and cognitive growth**.



- Development of **critical thinking skills**
- Growth in **leadership capacity**
- Cultivating a sense of **belonging** on campus and in the community.
- Improved **interpersonal relationships**

4. **Program Reach and Effectiveness:** Evaluating the program itself is vital for assessing success and identifying best practices. Metrics include:

- The **number of students served** by the program.
- The **development and utilization of specialized tools and resources** created by the program, such as mentoring toolkits or academic preparation program curricula, which indicate increased capacity and transportable models.

5. **Institutional and Systemic Impact:** Successful initiatives often create change beyond the individual student level. Metrics for this include:

- The establishment, strength, and functionality of **partnerships and networks** among educational institutions, criminal justice agencies, and community organizations.
- Evidence of **structural or systemic changes** influenced by the program, such as changes in admissions practices (like removing the "box"), financial aid access, or occupational licensing policies.
- Demonstrated **increased institutional capacity** to support justice-impacted students.
- Increased **visibility of issues** at the intersection of criminal justice and higher education within the institution and broader community.
- Collecting **qualitative feedback and narratives** from students, staff, and partners, which provide crucial context and perspective beyond quantitative data.

Supporting literature

[NOTE: Many of these sources are on file at RPIE as PDFs and can be shared on request]

Abeyta, M. E. (2020). *A phenomenological study of formerly incarcerated Latino men in California community colleges*. San Diego State University.

Abeyta, M., Torres, A., Hernandez, J. L., & Duran, O. (2021). Rising Scholars: A Case Study of Two Community Colleges Serving Formerly Incarcerated and System- Impacted Students. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 28(1), 99–109.



Advocacy on the outside: Advancing support for system-impacted students through grassroots leadership. (n.d.). <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20572>

Bostick, J. D. (2022). Rising Scholars: Narratives of Formerly Incarcerated/System-Impacted Community College Students in an On-Campus Support Program [Ed.D., Loyola Marymount University]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2719356911/abstract/39A06FB6F294047PQ/1>

Briceño, J. C. M. (2020). Community Cultural Wealth, Educational Persistence, and Justice-Impacted Students: A Quantitative Study Utilizing the General Social Survey of 2012 [Ed.D., San Diego State University]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*.
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2572564890/abstract/AC30674FC08F4C91PQ/1>

Copenhaver, A., Edwards-Willey, T. L., & Byers, B. D. (2007). Journeys in social stigma: The lives for formerly incarcerated felons in higher education. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 58(3), 268–283.

Donaldson, V. M., & Viera, C. (2021). *College after Prison: A Review of the Literature on Barriers and Supports to Postsecondary Education for Formerly Incarcerated College Students*. John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED615575>

Harlow, C. W. (2003). *Education and correctional populations*. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Prison Policy Initiative (n.d.). *Getting Back on Course: Educational exclusion and attainment among formerly incarcerated people*. Retrieved February 19, 2025, from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html>

Mukamal, D., Silbert, R., & Taylor, R. M. (2015). *Degrees of freedom: Expanding college opportunities for currently and formerly incarcerated Californians*. Stanford Criminal Justice Center.

Project Impact: A Public Community College Campus-Based Support and Reentry Program for Justice-Impacted Students in New York City. (n.d.).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681241282159>

(n.d.). Vera Institute of Justice. Retrieved February 14, 2025, from <https://www.vera.org/projects>



Runell, L. L. (n.d.). Identifying desistance pathways in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61(8), 894–918.

Smith, L., & Digard, L. (2020). *From corrections to college in California: An evaluation of student support during and after incarceration*. Vera Institute of Justice.

Sturm, S., Skolnick, K., & Wu, T. (2010). *Building pathways of possibility from criminal justice to college: College initiative as a catalyst linking individual and systematic change*. Center for Institutional and Social Change.

Supporting Criminal Justice-Involved Individuals | Campus Compact. (2016, November 29). <https://compact.org/resources/supporting-criminal-justice-involved-individuals>

The Nexus of Carcerality and Access and Success in Postsecondary Education. (n.d.). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211054820>

Torres, A. (2020). *Watering the roses that grew from concrete: The support services for formerly incarcerated students on a community college campus*. (Pub No. 28001534) [Doctoral Dissertation]. California State University, Long Beach.