



United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

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Health, Education and Human Services Division

B -257466

August 5, 1994

The Honorable Harris Wofford  
United States Senate

Dear Senator Wofford:

The Congress has been considering legislation, as part of a crime reduction package, that would prohibit prison inmates from receiving federal funding for education, such as Pell grants. You requested that we (1) identify the number of inmates receiving Pell grants, (2) describe the effect on grants for other needy students, and (3) measure the impact of education on recidivism, or relapse into criminal behavior. As agreed with your staff, this letter conveys the information you requested.

Background

At \$6 billion in 1993-94, the Pell grant program is the largest federal program providing grants to help students from low-income families finance their undergraduate postsecondary education. First authorized in 1972, the grants are fully funded by the federal government. They are awarded on the basis of need, as determined by the difference between the student's financial resources and the cost to him or her to attend school, including tuition and fees, room and board, books, supplies, transportation, miscellaneous expenses, and, in some cases, child or dependent care and disability-related expenses. The maximum award appropriated for award year 1993-94 was \$2,300.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to demonstrating need, students must be enrolled in an undergraduate course of study, and must meet numerous other eligibility requirements, including (1) a high school degree, (2) a recognized equivalent, or (3) have an ability to benefit from the education. The Higher

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<sup>1</sup>An award year is a 12 month period of time from July 1 of one year to June 30 of the next. Award year 1993-94 is the period July 1, 1993, through June 30, 1994.

Education Amendments of 1992 removed any requirement for a minimum number of courses or any limit on the number of years a student may take to complete an undergraduate degree. These amendments also prohibited incarcerated students, who are serving a death sentence or life sentence without possibility of parole, from receiving grants and limited the grants for other incarcerated students to tuition, fees, books, and supplies.

On the government's behalf, schools approved by the Department of Education determine students' eligibility and process and award the grants. Approved schools fall into one of three categories: (1) public or private non-profit schools of higher education, (2) public or private non-profit postsecondary vocational schools, and (3) private for-profit proprietary schools.<sup>2</sup> All eligible schools must have legal authorization to operate within a state, accreditation by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or approval by state agencies endorsed by the Secretary of Education, and admit as regular students only those with (1) a high school diploma, (2) a recognized equivalent, or (3) be beyond the state age of compulsory school attendance. According to the 1992 amendments, a school with more than 25 percent of its students incarcerated is not eligible to participate in federal student financial aid programs, including Pell grants.<sup>3</sup> The amendments also limit eligibility of correspondence programs because a school is generally eligible only if (1) less than 50 percent of its students are enrolled in correspondence courses, and (2) less than 50 percent of its courses are taught through correspondence.

#### Scope and Methodology

To obtain the information you requested, we interviewed program officials at the Departments of Education and Justice, as well as academic experts. In addition, we examined Pell grant eligibility criteria and procedures, analyzed preliminary 1993-94 data on Pell grants awarded to

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<sup>2</sup>We use "schools" instead of "institutions," as referred to in higher education legislation, to refer to the entities providing the education in order to avoid confusion with prison institutions.

<sup>3</sup>The Secretary may waive this prohibition for a nonprofit institution that offers a two-year associate degree and/or a four-year baccalaureate degree.

incarcerated students, and reviewed the literature on recidivism.

The Department of Education first began collecting data during the 1993-94 award year on whether or not Pell recipients were incarcerated. The Department, although still correcting the data, provided us with preliminary data on incarcerated students as of April 4, 1994. According to Department officials, these data are very close to the final totals because most of the awards had been made as of this date. However, the accuracy of the data is limited by its preliminary nature and Education's limited verification procedures. Department officials estimate that the data will not be complete until approximately one year after the end of the award year. The verification procedures are limited because schools self-report. The Department only attempts to verify the schools' reports if there is an obvious anomaly, such as an Ohio school that reported more incarcerated students than the total for any other state.

Participation of Inmates  
Small Part Of Pell Program

Inmate participation is a small part of the total Pell grant program, according to our data analysis. Only 23,000, of the approximately 4 million Pell recipients for the 1993-94 award year, were incarcerated. This represents less than 1 percent, that is, 1 out of every 500 Pell recipients. Inmates received \$35 million of the \$6 billion awarded in Pell grants in 1993-94. This represents less than 1 percent, that is, 6 cents out of every 10 Pell program dollars. In addition, the average award for incarcerated students was the same as for non-incarcerated students, \$1,500 out of the \$2,300 dollar maximum award.<sup>4</sup> Finally, only a small percentage of all inmates receive Pell grants. This is because the 23,000 inmates represent just 2 out of every 100 federal or state inmates.

Incarcerated students receiving Pell grants are concentrated in a few states and schools, as shown in figure 1. Almost three-fourths of inmate Pell recipients are in nine states. Inmates in non-federal prisons in

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<sup>4</sup>The data for non-incarcerated students is for the 1992-93 award year, the most recent available. However, we have no reason to believe that the 1993-94 average award would be significantly different, particularly as the maximum appropriated award was the same.



Almost one-third of inmates receiving Pell grants are at 11 schools. Less than 3 percent (269 of 9,468) of schools eligible to award Pell grants report inmates as recipients. See enclosure II for a list of the schools with the highest number of incarcerated students. As shown in table 1, incarcerated Pell recipients are most likely to enroll in programs at public post-secondary schools of at least 2 years, but less than 4, or programs at private non-profit schools of 4 or more years.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: Percentage of Inmate Pell Recipients by Type of School and Program Length

Length of Program	Type of School			
	Public	Private non-profit	Proprietary (Private for-profit)	Total
Less than 2 years	2	0	8	10
At least 2 years, but less than 4	39	3	1	43
4 years or more	12	35	0	47
Total	53	38	9	100

Grants to Incarcerated Students Do Not Affect Grants to Other Needy Students

According to Department officials, grants to inmates do not affect the eligibility or size of grants to other students. If incarcerated students received no Pell grants, no student currently denied a Pell award would have received one and no award amount would be increased. The Department operates the Pell program as an entitlement

<sup>6</sup>The type of school categories in the database differ from those in the legislation in that they are defined solely by financial control rather than the distinction between schools of higher education and vocational schools.

program in that every eligible student demonstrating a need, as defined by the program, is awarded a grant, up to a maximum award. To meet the needs of current students, the program borrows from future appropriations. This makes it unlikely that the \$35 million that was awarded to incarcerated students could have been used to increase the award for other Pell recipients. According to Department officials, the money gained by reducing current expenditures by \$35 million, less than 1 percent, would have been used to reduce the amount borrowed from future years' appropriations. In addition, Department officials estimated, if the money had been distributed among other recipients, individual awards would have increased by about \$3, at most.

Measuring the Impact  
of Education on Recidivism  
Has Resulted in Conflicting Findings

Many studies have attempted to isolate the impact of education from the many other factors affecting recidivism. These studies have resulted in conflicting findings. Differences in findings may be partly explained by the significant methodological challenges such studies face, both in terms of design and availability of data. First, design is complicated by the varied, complex and inter-related factors influencing recidivism. The sociology of criminology suggests that many factors are difficult to either define or measure. For example, a factor such as the prisoner's level of community support, which could include marital relationship, may be significant in reducing recidivism. However, a positive marital relationship may be a measure of community support for some, but an abusive marital relationship may increase the probability of recidivism for others.

Second, design is complicated by the process of self-selection for education programs. Because prisoners generally volunteer to participate in education programs, they are, by definition, different from those who do not volunteer. These differences may affect recidivism as much, or more, than the education programs themselves. The best way to control for these differences, both known and unknown, would be to conduct an experiment in which prisoners are randomly provided or not provided education programs. The experience of individual inmates from both groups could then be followed, over a period of years, after the inmates leave prison. With or without a randomized study, determining the impact would require

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tracking individual prisoners over time because of the inter-related factors that influence recidivism.

We have provided your staff with an annotated literature search and copies of some recent studies on the impact of education on recidivism. Included was a study the Bureau of Prisons released in 1992 on its Federal Post Release Employment Project (PREP). As we reported previously,<sup>7</sup> we found the study to be generally well-designed, it demonstrates some of the difficulties associated with studies of recidivism. PREP found that inmates participating in work or vocational education were less likely to have their parole revoked (as a result of committing a crime or a technical violation of their parole) than other inmates who had similar background characteristics but did not participate in work or vocational training programs. As we reported previously, a potentially serious threat to the validity of the study includes (1) the absence of random assignment of prisoners and (2) differences between those who did and those who did not participate in work and vocational programs that might influence the success of the inmates after release from prison.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this letter, please call me at (202) 512-7014 or Charles Jeszeck at (202) 512-7036.



Linda G. Morra, Director  
Education and  
Employment Issues

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<sup>7</sup>GAO/GGD-93-33, Federal Prisons: Inmate and Staff Views on Education and Work Training Programs, January 19, 1993

State Totals of Incarcerated Students Awarded Pell Grants  
for Award Year 1993/94, as of April 4, 1994

Ohio	3,793
New York	3,034
Missouri	1,557
Texas	1,479
Illinois	1,467
Massachusetts	1,306
Georgia	1,186
Alabama	1,094
Virginia	1,054
Pennsylvania	708
Indiana	655
Colorado	567
Tennessee	564
South Carolina	517
Maryland	455
Louisiana	363
Mississippi	341
Kentucky	319
Oregon	313
Oklahoma	309
Nevada	264
Kansas	249
Wisconsin	245
Arkansas	214
Minnesota	148
New Jersey	143
California	134
Michigan	112
South Dakota	75
West Virginia	66
Wyoming	58
New Hampshire	51
Delaware	44
North Dakota	41
Utah	39
Montana	15
Alaska	4
North Carolina	4
Washington	2
Arizona	1
Florida	1
Iowa	1
Total	22,993

Schools With High Numbers of Incarcerated Students Receiving Pell Grants for Award Year 93-94, as of April 4, 1994

	Number of Incarcerated Students
Ohio University, Ohio	1,094
Park College, Missouri	818
J F Ingram State Vocational School, Alabama	729
Ashland University, Ohio	716
Atlantic Union College, Massachusetts	708
Mount Wachusett Community College, Massachusetts	585
Microcomputer Technology Institute, Texas	580
Wilmington College, Ohio	572
Brewter Parker College, Georgia	538
Genesee Community College, New York	444
Branell College - Nashville, Tennessee	414

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