

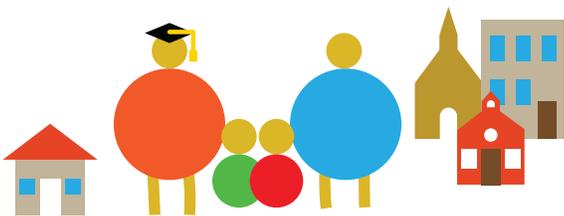


# TURNING ON THE TAP: How Returning Access to Tuition Assistance for Incarcerated People Improves the Health of New Yorkers

## *Executive Summary*

**Expanding access to college education for people in New York prisons would benefit the overall health and well-being of the communities that formerly incarcerated people return to, as well as the individuals who receive the education, and their families.**

College education boosts self-respect and self-esteem, and improves judgment – factors that contribute to a safer and more engaged community, better parenting and home environment for children, and safer prison environments. These changes can foster better mental and physical health for all.

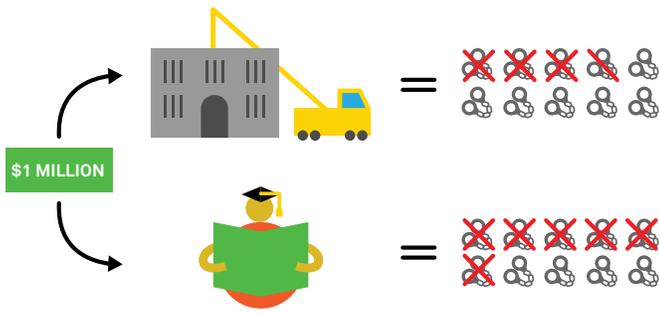


A Health Impact Assessment of the benefits of in-prison college education finds:

- **For New York**, in-prison college education is a cost-effective investment in reducing crime and recidivism. A study on crime control strategies found that every \$1 million spent on building

more prisons prevents about 350 crimes, but the same amount invested in correctional education prevents more than 600 crimes.

- **For communities**, benefits of in-prison college education mean that when students return to the community, they engage in lower rates of crime and have a higher level of civic engagement when compared to other formerly incarcerated people returning to the community.
- **For those who receive college education in prison**, college teaches critical thinking skills that help people better understand and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It also improves their chances of getting a job, reuniting with their families, finding their place in society, not committing new offenses, and not returning to prison.
- **For children**, benefits of in-prison college education include improved parenting behaviors, higher family income, increased likelihood that children and family members achieve higher levels of education, and reduced likelihood that children experience behavioral problems and get involved in the criminal justice system themselves.
- **For other people in prisons**, college education improves relationships and reduces conflicts, resulting in a safer prison environment.

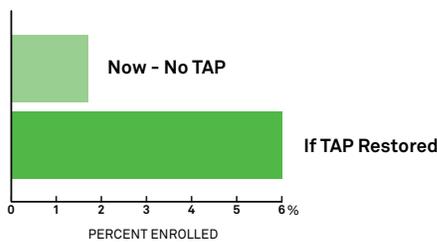


## THE CONTEXT

The state’s Tuition Assistance Program, or TAP, provides grants to low-income New York residents to help them afford college. The federal equivalent of the TAP grant is the Pell grant. TAP is one of the largest state student financial aid programs in the U.S. Until 1994, TAP and Pell grants helped incarcerated people in 45 New York prisons enroll in courses offered by 23 colleges. That year, about 3,500 students in prison received assistance, funded by a very small share of the total TAP budget (less than 1%).

Despite community concerns to the contrary, the Higher Education Services Corporation, which administers TAP, reported that TAP grants to students in prison did not take funds away from non-incarcerated students. Appropriations for TAP are established prior to the start of each school year, and any applicant who meets the requirements will receive the funding, irrespective of the number of other applicants and their income levels for any given year.

Despite evidence of the benefits of correctional education, in 1994, the federal government prohibited Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison. The following year, New York Gov. George Pataki facilitated efforts to prohibit TAP grant eligibility for people in prison. After TAP and Pell funding was eliminated, in-prison college education programs in New York almost disappeared.



In the last decade, new leadership of the state corrections department promoted a model in which local colleges partner with prisons and seek funding from private foundations to provide college education in prison. Today there are college programs in 21 of the state’s 54 prisons.

But foundation funding is limited and hard to secure. Before funding was cut, approximately 5% of the total

prison population was receiving TAP funding. Current enrollment rates in college education programs are closer to 1.7% of the total prison population in New York State. A survey conducted for this report revealed that, on average, only one-third of those who apply for the programs are accepted, and one reason the college programs gave was lack of resources to increase capacity. Almost all of the programs said they could serve more students – up to four times as many – if tuition assistance was available. Restoring TAP eligibility could also attract other colleges to set up new prison programs.

## HEALTH IMPACTS AND KEY FINDINGS

**Health impacts:** Communities that experience lower crime rates are likely to experience fewer crime-related injuries and traumas, and have better overall mental health. Communities that have more economically and civically engaged citizens are also likely to have better overall physical and mental health.

Education is an important factor in reducing crime in communities. In a meta-analysis of 19 studies, the RAND Corporation concluded that people who participate in college education in prison have 51% lower odds of returning to prison than those who did not participate in these programs.

When students receive college education while in prison and then return to communities, the communities benefit because these students are more likely to find jobs and be engaged in civic life after they are released.

*“People who are able to pursue college inside prison increase their chances of being employable upon release, thus becoming productive members within their families and society. Because I was able to get a job right away, I didn’t have to rely on social service agencies to provide health care, food stamps, housing, etc. My friends told me, ‘I’ve never seen somebody so happy to pay taxes.’”*  
 —Cheryl Wilkins, formerly incarcerated student

**Health impacts:** Healthier individuals make healthier communities. In addition to being more effective citizens, students with improved self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and social engagement experience better mental health and behavioral health outcomes, such as better health-promoting behaviors, avoiding risky health behaviors, and improved longevity.



College education in prison allows a person to develop a positive self-concept. The prisoner role, where people are denied the opportunity to make decisions for themselves, is dehumanizing and can result in learned helplessness. In the student role, people are given choices, their perspectives are sought and heard, and they can see the results of their decisions. The student comes to think of himself or herself as someone who can achieve and succeed, increasing the chances they will make good behavioral choices.



*“Yes, I’m an ex-offender, but I’m educated. I can say I’m a John Jay student. I have a 3.95 GPA.”*  
—Devon Simmons, formerly incarcerated student

Prison study “supported self-introspection and reflection,” said John Valverde, who was accepted to CUNY Law School while incarcerated at Sing Sing prison. Mr. Valverde went on to co-found Hudson Link, which helps facilitates programming and funding for courses at Sing Sing from five New York colleges. “It prevented people from just making excuses or justifying your actions; really made you think about your responsibility and who you were at the time you committed the crime.”

**Health impacts:** Better employment opportunities for parents lead to higher family incomes – one of the strongest determinants of health and well-being – providing resources that can improve access to healthy foods, housing, and ongoing education. These attributes are then passed down to children, improving the health and well-being of the next generation. Improved parenting behaviors also lead to improved socio-emotional development of children.

These improvements in self-esteem and self-respect, judgment, and critical thinking skills also translate into better parenting behaviors. New York State is home to an estimated 105,000 children with a parent serving time in prison or jail. Having an incarcerated parent is a stressor that has long-term negative consequences for the health of a child. Having a parent participate in college education while in prison can re-shape that dynamic by improving the quality of parent-child interactions, increasing the parent’s involvement in his or her child’s education, and having the parent model the conflict resolution and critical thinking skills that the child can then learn and benefit from.

*“You’re not just educating prisoners. You’re educating society. I’m a mom of four... I’m helping stop the cycle.”*  
—Sharlene Henry, formerly incarcerated student

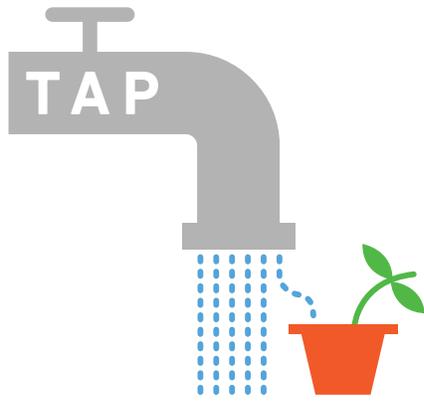
The benefits of college education are not limited to children. Other family members may also find inspiration, motivation, and enhanced quality of relationships.

*“I was the first one to go to school in my family, to get a college education. After that – my niece has a BA from John Jay, my nephew has a PhD and teaches at Hunter, my younger brother got his AD. My mother, may she rest in peace, her thing was – ‘Look what you started.’ And it was from the penitentiary.”*  
—Andre Centeno, formerly incarcerated student

**Health impacts:** Prison environments that offer better relationships and fewer conflicts experience better physical health through fewer injuries and better mental health through improved social connections and reduced stress.

The prison environment also benefits from college education programs that are offered in correctional facilities. The Correctional Association of New York, a non-profit authorized by the state to examine and report on prison conditions, credits college programs with “an incentive for good behavior; producing mature, well-spoken leaders who have a calming influence on other [incarcerated] people and on correction officers; and communicating the message that society has sufficient respect for the human potential of incarcerated people.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Legislators in New York State are considering S975/A2870 (2015), a bill that would repeal the ban on incarcerated people receiving financial aid for college education through TAP. The purpose of the legislation is to increase access to educational resources in prison and increase educational attainment for those who are incarcerated.

There are approximately 53,000 people in New York state prisons, 59% of whom have a verified high school diploma and could therefore be eligible for TAP funding. Based on data from programs we surveyed, current enrollment in college education programs in New York state prisons averages 924 students per year, with an average of 80 Associate's degrees and 32 Bachelor's degrees awarded each year. Lack of resources is one reason that only one-third of prison applicants are accepted for college study. If tuition assistance funding was restored, existing programs would be able to enroll up to 3,234 people a year.

This HIA finds that the proposed legislation would have positive health impacts for the communities that formerly incarcerated people return to, as well as the individuals who receive the education, and their families. To ensure these health benefits are accrued, we recommend the following:

- **To increase the availability of college programs in New York State prisons, eligibility for Tuition Assistance Program funding for qualified incarcerated people should be restored. Both public and private institutions of higher education should be eligible to receive TAP funds, and all students should be required to be earning course credit that can be applied towards an AA, BA, or MA degree.**
- **To demonstrate their systematic support for college programs, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision should provide appropriate space, security, technology,**

**and other resources necessary for the creation, operation, and maintenance of successful college education programs within the system.**

- **To provide stability for students and maintain their ability to participate in college programs, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision should allow and honor educational holds to limit student transfers.**
- **To ensure the academic quality of college programs in prison, all college education providers and courses should meet rigorous academic standards.**

Finally, while it is important that education be provided in prisons, it is equally important to maintain that educational momentum upon release by emphasizing education as part of the re-entry process as well.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a public engagement and decision-support tool that can be used to assess policy proposals and make recommendations to improve health outcomes associated with those proposals. The fundamental goal of HIA is to ensure that health and health inequities are considered in decision-making processes using an objective and scientific approach, and engaging stakeholders in the process.

For this HIA, the following methods were employed:

- Extensive review of the scientific and grey literature
- Data collection from existing sources
- Focus groups
- Subject matter expert interviews

This project was conducted by Human Impact Partners of Oakland, CA in partnership with the Education from the Inside Out Coalition and advisory committee members from the Vera Institute of Justice, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the Fortune Society, Syracuse University, and the Correctional Association of New York.

This report is supported by grants from the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, and by the Kresge Foundation. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Health Impact Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, or the Kresge Foundation.

To access the full report, visit: [www.turnonthetapny.org](http://www.turnonthetapny.org)

Human Impact Partners works to transform the policies and places people need to live healthy lives by increasing the consideration of health and equity in decision-making. For more about Human Impact Partners, visit: [www.humanimpact.org](http://www.humanimpact.org).