

# Second Chance Pell: Six Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016–2022

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The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (SCP), launched by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in 2015, provides need-based Pell Grants to people in state and federal prisons. The initiative examines whether expanding access to financial aid increases incarcerated adults' participation in postsecondary educational opportunities. This program gives invited colleges the opportunity to provide credentialed college education programs within state and federal prisons using federal aid for incarcerated students who qualify. In 2016, ED invited 67 colleges in 28 states, and in 2020, it expanded SCP to include a total of 130 colleges from 42 states and Washington, DC. In 2022, SCP expanded again to include a total of 200 colleges in 48 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico.<sup>1</sup> The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) provides technical assistance to the participating colleges and corrections departments to ensure that the programs provide high-quality postsecondary education in prison and after release.

This report summarizes the first six years of the experiment and primarily focuses on information from the 2021–2022 financial aid year, using survey responses from 75 participating colleges with enrolled students funded through SCP during this period.<sup>2</sup>

## Highlights

- ▶ More than 40,000 students participated in postsecondary education funded through Second Chance Pell between 2016 and 2022.
- ▶ Student enrollments and completions rebounded in the 2021–2022 financial aid year after showing slower growth during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ Changes to the mode of instruction due to the pandemic do not appear to be permanent: 17 colleges that had previously anticipated continued use of synchronous distance or a hybrid model of instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic reported their intention to use face-to-face instruction after pandemic-related restrictions are lifted.
- ▶ All but one of the participating colleges plan to transition to a Prison Education Program as defined by the FAFSA Simplification Act, and all of these colleges have taken multiple steps to prepare for Pell restoration.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Racial and gender disparities persist in both enrollments and completions, with the most pronounced disparities existing among Hispanic/Latino students.
- ▶ More than one-third of colleges (36 percent) included people who were system-impacted in their faculty, staff, or administration.

# The positive impacts of postsecondary education in prison

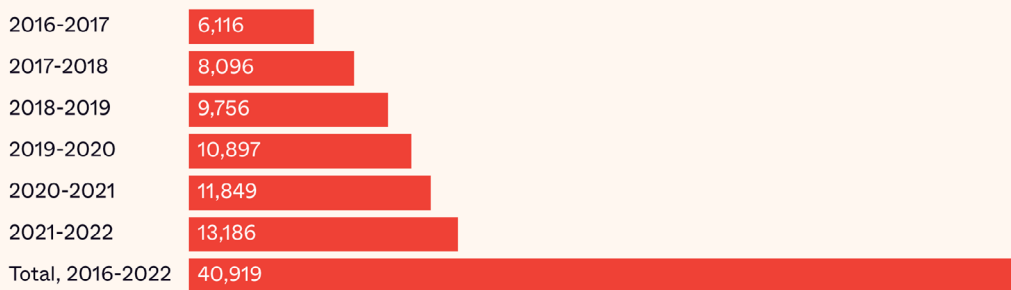
Access to educational opportunities in prison has significant and meaningful benefits for incarcerated people, for their communities, and for the public at large.

- › **Personal and community development:** People who participate in postsecondary education in prison describe the experience as transformative, pushing them to develop new identities, perspectives, and goals, and to focus on self-reflection and improvement.<sup>4</sup> These courses also provide incarcerated students and formerly incarcerated alumni with knowledge, skills, and connections they can use to benefit their children and families, multiplying the impact of a single college degree.<sup>5</sup>
- › **Job training:** Prison postsecondary education programs are becoming increasingly essential for incarcerated students' post-release employment and successful reentry: by 2027, 70 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.<sup>6</sup>
- › **Racial equity:** Postsecondary education can facilitate upward social mobility to racially marginalized groups. People of color are a disproportionate majority of the prison population, making the availability of postsecondary programs in prison an important avenue to future opportunity.<sup>7</sup>
- › **Public safety:** As incarcerated people achieve higher levels of education, their likelihood of recidivism decreases. Incarcerated people who participate in postsecondary education programs have 48 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not.<sup>8</sup>
- › **Safety inside prisons:** Prisons with postsecondary education programs have fewer violent incidents than prisons without them, creating safer working conditions for staff and safer living environments for incarcerated people.<sup>9</sup>
- › **Government savings:** Reducing incarceration benefits taxpayers—every dollar invested in prison-based education yields more than four dollars in taxpayer savings from reduced incarceration costs.<sup>10</sup>

## Enrollments and credential completions

Over the past six years, enrollments have increased every year at the surveyed colleges, despite an overall decrease in the prison population during that time.<sup>11</sup>(See Figure 1.) Since the start of the experiment, 40,919 unique students have enrolled in postsecondary education programs through the Second Chance Pell Initiative. This number includes previously reported cumulative totals from colleges that did not respond this year but did respond in previous years, giving the most comprehensive cumulative number of SCP students. In the 2021–2022 financial aid year, there were 13,186 SCP students, more than double (215 percent) the number of students enrolled during the first year of the experiment.

**Figure 1. Unduplicated students enrolled in Second Chance Pell\***

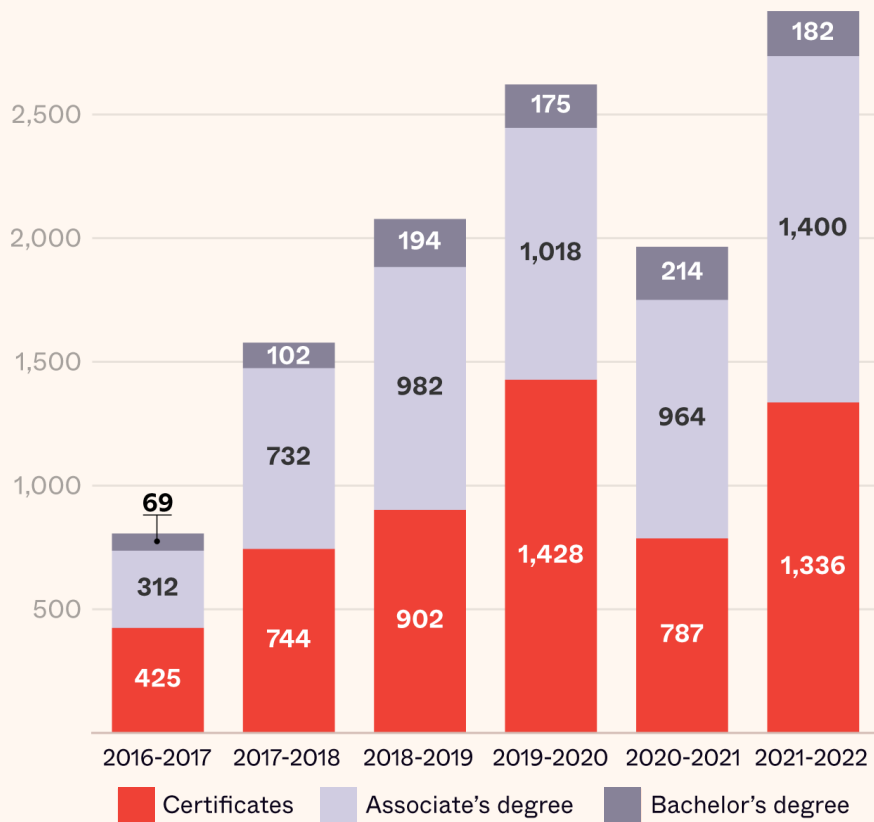


\* Unduplicated students refers to the number of unique participants enrolled through Second Chance Pell over the six financial aid years reported here. (Some students participating in longer programs enrolled in multiple years.)

In the past six years, SCP students earned 11,966 credentials. In the 2021–2022 financial aid year, students in prison earned 2,918 credentials: 6 percent (182) were bachelor’s degrees, 48 percent (1,400) were associate’s degrees, and 46 percent (1,336) were certificates or postsecondary diplomas. (See Figure 2.)

The number of credentials earned decreased in the 2020–2021 financial aid year, likely due to program suspensions or slowdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, annual earned credentials rebounded in 2021–2022, continuing the growth in completions observed in the years before the pandemic.

**Figure 2. Credentials earned by year and type**

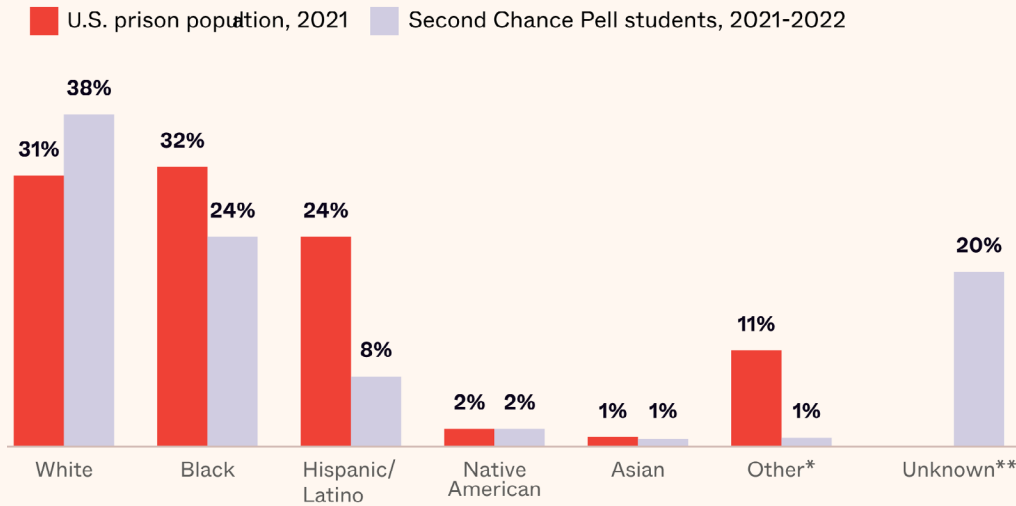


## Student demographics across enrollment and credentials earned

To assess racial and gender equity in Second Chance Pell programs, Vera compared student demographics to the entire pool of prospective students, which is the U.S. prison population. The U.S. prison population is disproportionately composed of people of color and men compared to the U.S. population.<sup>12</sup> The vast majority (93 percent) of people in prison are incarcerated in facilities for men, with 7 percent of the prison population incarcerated in women's prison facilities.<sup>13</sup>

Racial and gender disparities exist among the students enrolled in SCP programs compared to the general U.S. prison population. People incarcerated in facilities for women are overrepresented in SCP programs, with more than 13 percent of students housed in women's facilities. White SCP students were overrepresented by approximately 7 percentage points, Black students were underrepresented by 8 percentage points, and Hispanic/Latino<sup>14</sup> students were underrepresented by more than 15 percentage points.<sup>15</sup> (See Figure 3.)

**Figure 3. Race and ethnicity of Second Chance Pell students and U.S. prison population, 2021-2022**



\* Other includes people who identify as two or more races or as another race that was not broken out in other categories.

\*\* Unknown includes instances when race/ethnicity data was not collected, when it was not reported, or if the student refused to answer race/ethnicity questions.

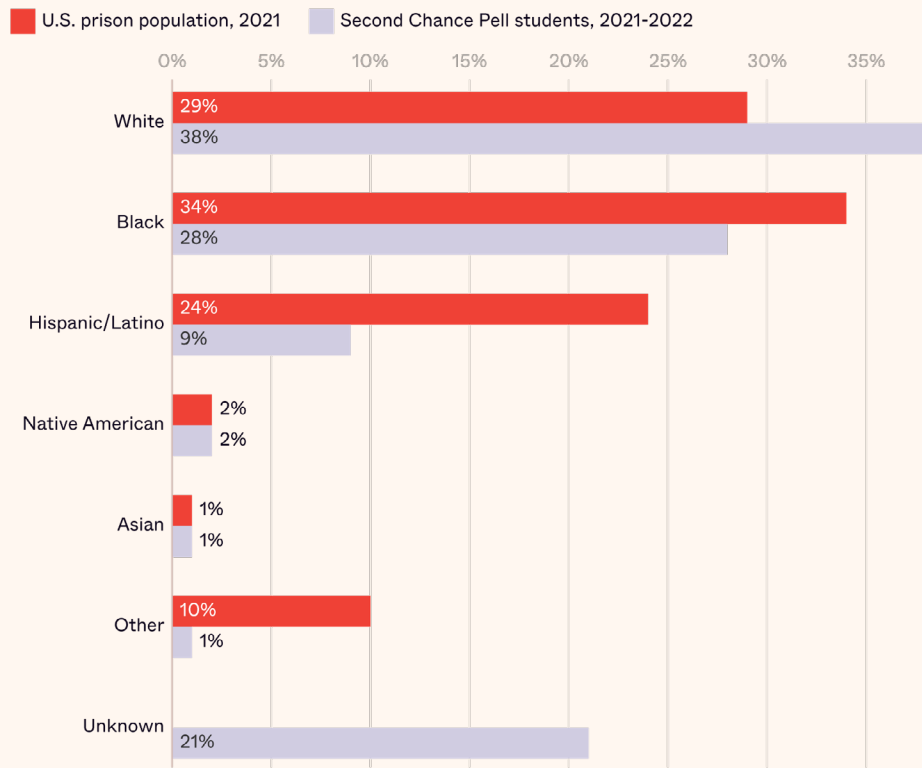
These racial disparities vary between students in facilities for men and in facilities for women. (See Figure 4.)

- › Among students in facilities for women, white students are overrepresented by 18 percentage points. Among students in facilities for men, white students are overrepresented by approximately 9 percentage points.
- › Among students in facilities for men, Black students are underrepresented by approximately 7 percentage points. In facilities for women, the proportion of SCP students who are Black is almost the same as the proportion of Black people who are incarcerated.

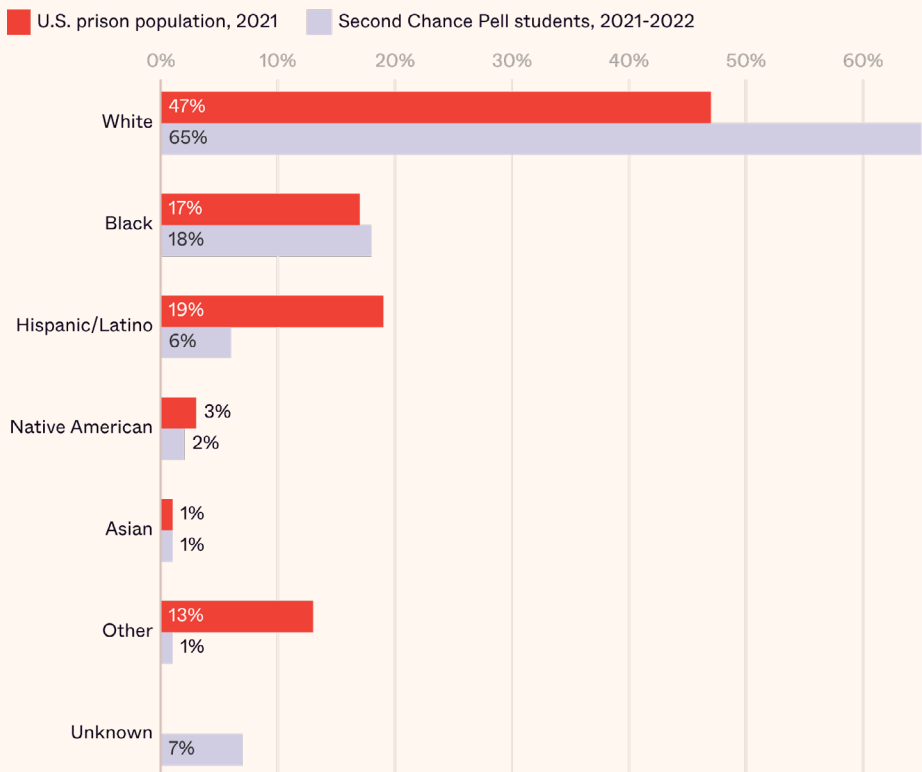
As has been noted in previous years, Hispanic/Latino people are severely underrepresented in SCP, accounting for 24 percent of the prison population but only 8 percent of SCP students. Race and ethnicity information was not available for more than 20 percent of students in facilities for men and about 7 percent of students in facilities for women because it was not collected or reported.

**Figure 4. Race and gender demographics of Second Chance Pell students, 2021–2022, and U.S. prison population, 2021\***

**Men**



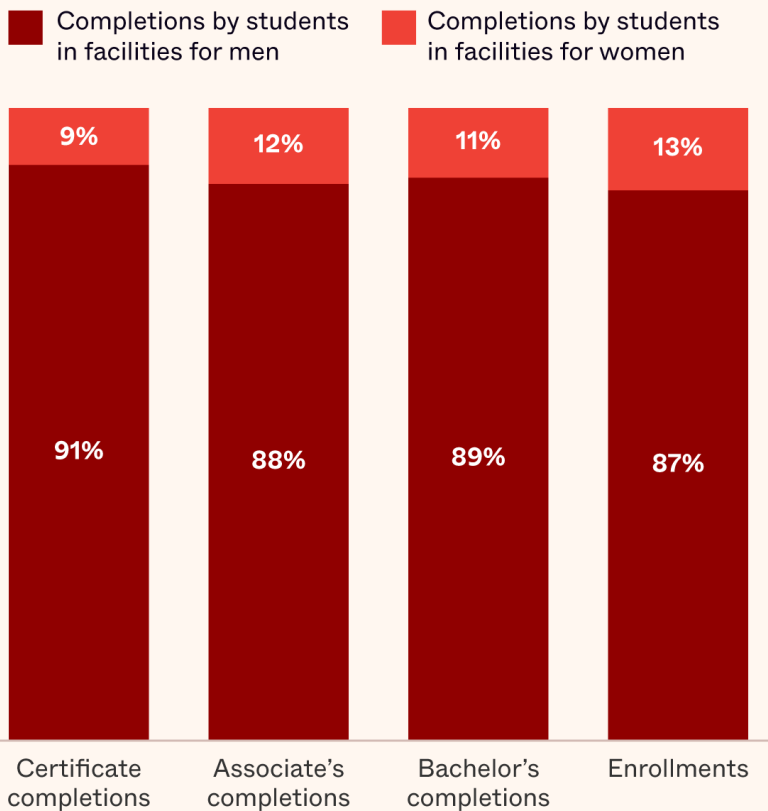
**Women**



\* For approximately 9.5 percent of all SCP students in 2021-2022, colleges were not able to provide race and gender cross-tabulations. These students are not represented in this graph.

Turning from enrollment to credentials earned, there are some differences in completions by the gender designation of the facility where students are housed. Students in facilities designated for women make up approximately 13 percent of students but complete 11 percent of credentials. This slight disproportion may be due to the types of credentials that are offered or pursued by students in these facilities. For example, students in facilities designated for men earn proportionally slightly more certificates than students in facilities designated for women, earning 91 percent of all certificates but making up 87 percent of enrolled students. (See Figure 5.)

**Figure 5. Credential completions compared to enrollment by facility gender, 2021-2022**



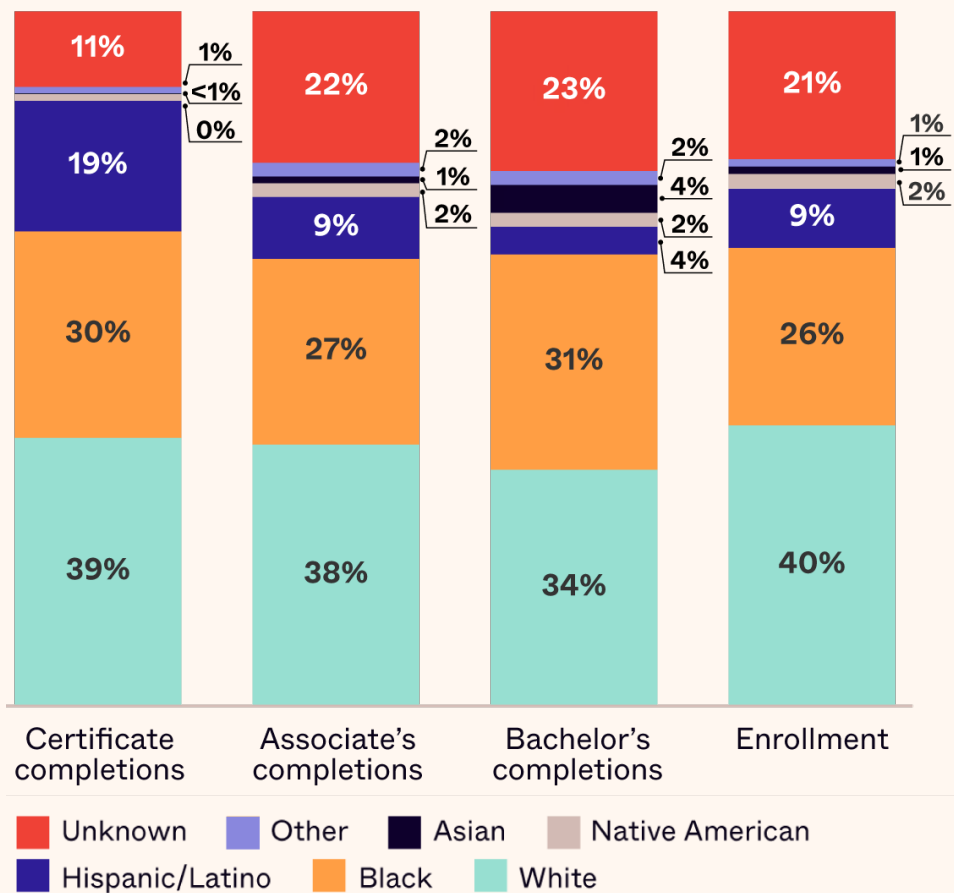
It is possible for students to complete more than one certificate in a single year, which may partly explain the relatively larger number of credentials earned by students in men’s facilities. This difference may also be partly driven by the fact that some programs in women’s facilities are newer, and students in facilities for women may have had less time to complete a multi-year credential such as an associate’s or bachelor’s degree.

Students in different racial and ethnic demographic groups earn credentials relatively proportional to their enrollment in programming, with the notable exception of Hispanic/Latino students. Although Hispanic/Latino students make up 8 percent of current enrollments, they account for 4 percent of bachelor’s completions and 19 percent of certificate completions. (See Figure 6.) In other words, Hispanic/Latino students

are underrepresented by 50 percent among bachelor's completions and are overrepresented among certificate completions by more than 100 percent. Further research is needed to understand the reasons why these students are not more proportionally represented across different credential completions.

It is important to note that the race and ethnicity of the student completing the credential is missing for about 17 percent of all credentials earned, and that completions are likely underreported because only about half (53 percent) of programs track completions after people are released from prison.

**Figure 6. Credential completions compared to enrollment by race and ethnicity, 2021-2022**



## Student services, supports, and voice

Prison education programs vary in the types of student services and supports that they provide. Most Second Chance Pell programs (88 percent) and most students (92 percent) have some level of access to academic research materials. Most commonly, students have access to materials through the college library (29 percent of programs and 47 percent of students). (See Figure 7.) Some students can access academic

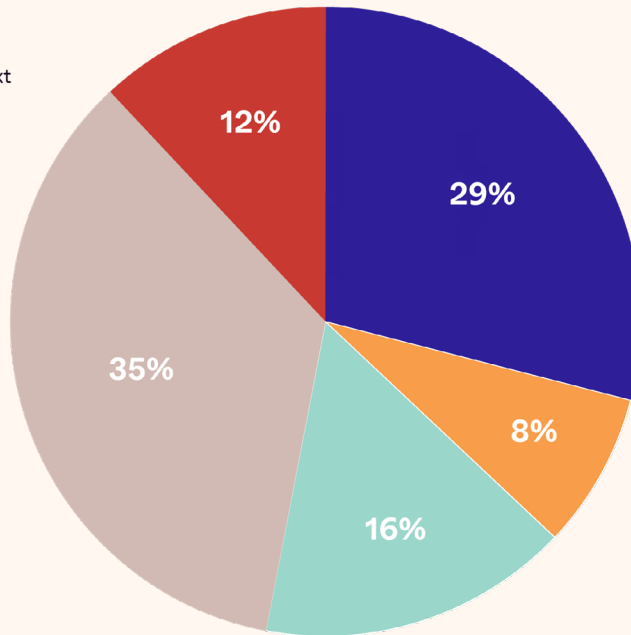


resources through a database of articles (8 percent of programs and 13 percent of students), and some smaller programs use volunteer assistance to run searches and provide materials to incarcerated students (16 percent of programs and 5 percent of students). Twelve percent of programs serving 8 percent of students had no access to research materials.

**Figure 7. Access to academic resources, 2021-2022**

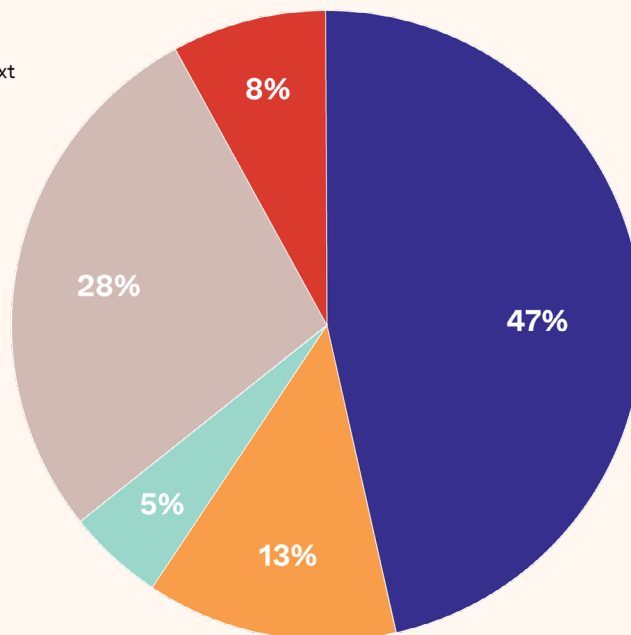
**Programs**

- Yes, through the college library
- Yes, through a searchable database of articles with full text
- Yes, through volunteer help
- Other
- No access



**Students**

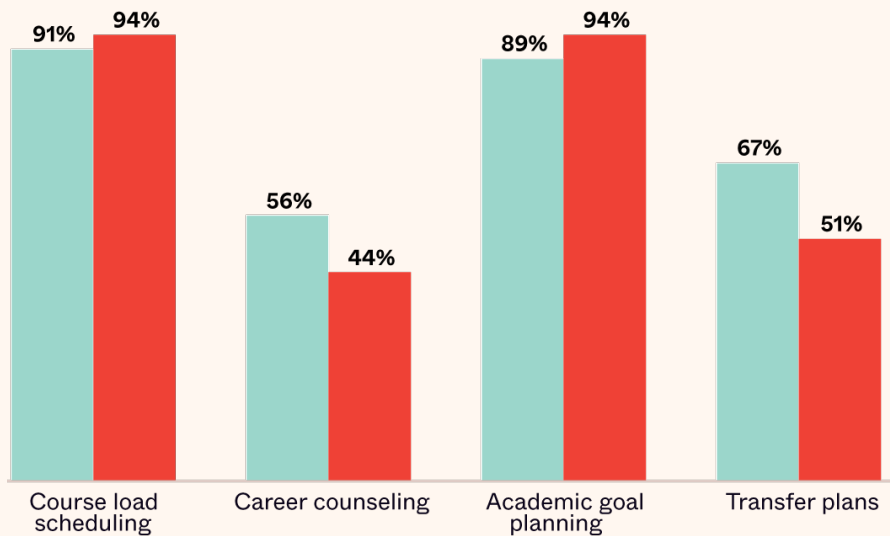
- Yes, through the college library
- Yes, through a searchable database of articles with full text
- Yes, through volunteer help
- Other
- No access



\* The percentages for all categories may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Most SCP programs (96 percent), accounting for 95 percent of students, reported that students had access to academic support counseling at least once per semester or two quarters. The majority of students (94 percent) had access to course load scheduling and academic goal planning during academic counseling. (See Figure 8.) Students had more limited access to career counseling (44 percent) or transfer plans (51 percent). For a handful of schools, academic counseling also included reentry planning.

**Figure 8. Contents of academic counseling, 2021-2022**



Some colleges had formal mechanisms to solicit feedback about their SCP programs from SCP students and people who are directly impacted by the criminal legal system. Nearly half of SCP programs (47 percent) had student advisory boards, voice councils, or other groups that provide ongoing feedback to their postsecondary education program or to correctional education. Programs with these student groups together enrolled 68 percent of students in 2021–22. Even among programs without such student groups, several programs had informal or ad hoc means for soliciting input from students or had plans under development or partially implemented.

## Instructors and faculty

Most Second Chance Pell programs (72 percent) have at least five faculty members serving students who are incarcerated. Approximately half of programs require faculty to have the minimum credentials for teaching postsecondary education (47 percent of programs and 47 percent of students), and approximately half of programs require faculty to hold terminal degrees (53 percent of programs and 53 percent of students). In 92 percent of programs covering 92 percent of students, faculty have at least five years of teaching experience. Slightly more than one-third of programs (36 percent) included people who were system-impacted in their faculty, staff, or administration.

## COVID-19 impacts

Second Chance Pell programs appear to be rebounding after the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and programs. Student enrollments and completions rebounded in the 2021–2022 financial aid year after showing slower growth during the pandemic. This year’s survey also found that changes to the mode of instruction due to the pandemic do not appear to be permanent: 17 colleges that had previously anticipated continuing to use either synchronous distance (15) or a hybrid model (2) of instruction this year reported their intention to implement face-to-face instruction once pandemic-related restrictions are lifted.

## Programs and students by state

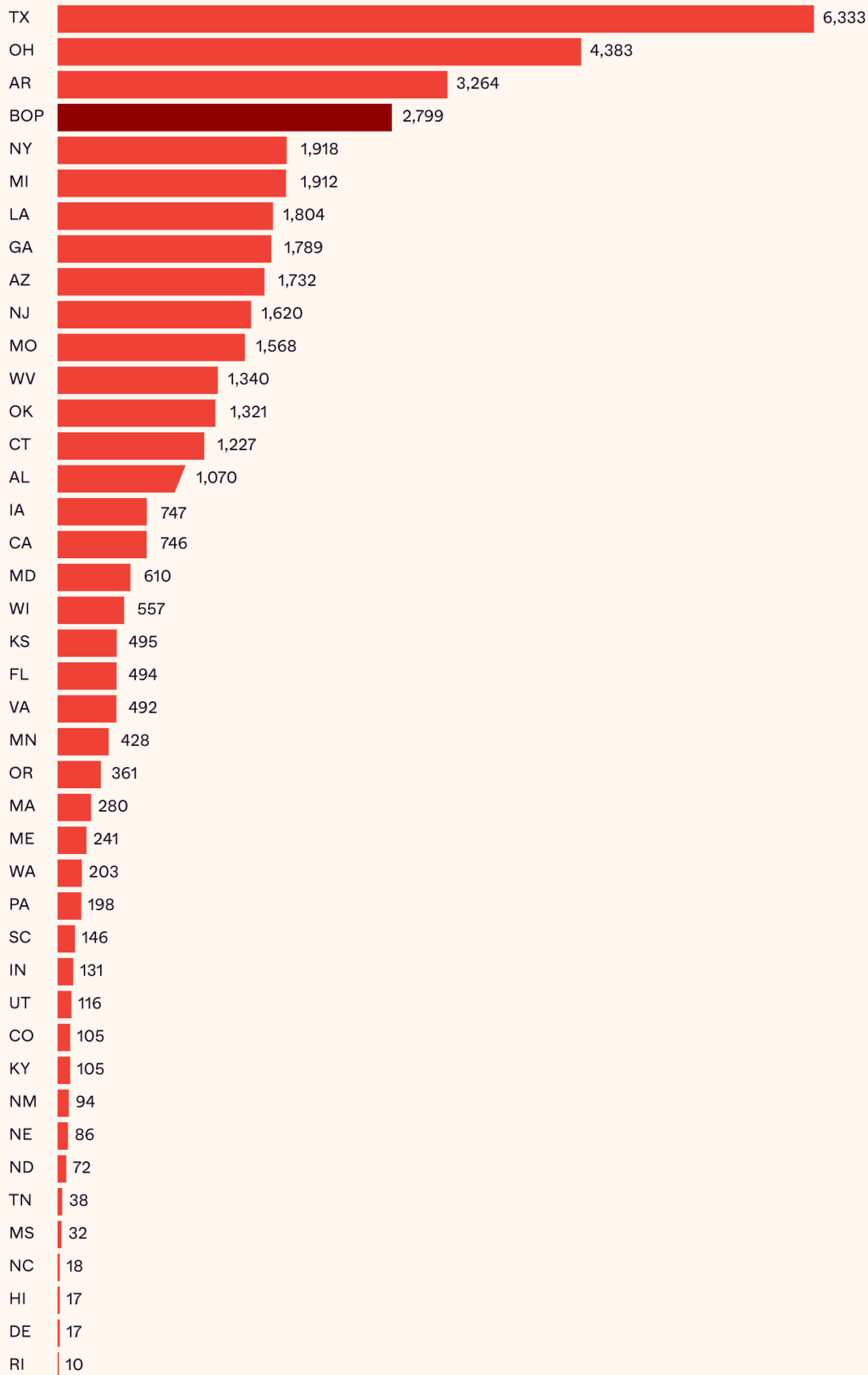
Second Chance Pell programs have launched in 48 states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In the 2021–22 academic year, 13,186 students were enrolled in SCP, with 40,919 unduplicated students enrolled in SCP programs during the life of the experiment. Most students have enrolled in programs held in state prisons, with 2,799 students participating in programs in federal facilities from 2016–2022. Programs in Texas, Ohio, and Arkansas have enrolled the highest numbers of students. (See Figure 9.)

## Pell restoration

With the passage of the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act, as many as 767,000 people in prison will become eligible for Pell Grants once it is implemented on July 1, 2023.<sup>16</sup> Of the 75 colleges that were asked whether they intend to transition from a Second Chance Pell site to an approved Prison Education Program, as defined by the FAFSA Simplification Act, only one college did not commit to transitioning.

All of the colleges that responded to the survey have taken specific steps to prepare for Pell restoration, most commonly by connecting with others in education, including other departments within their own institution of higher education, peer colleges and consortia of postsecondary education in prison programs, and the Department of Education. However, fewer colleges have connected with the Department of Corrections, Federal Bureau of Prisons, or other corrections agencies that have jurisdiction over prospective students. This could suggest that further support, resources, or information are needed to facilitate strong collaboration among prospective prison education programs and oversight entities, as defined and required by the FAFSA Simplification Act.

**Figure 9. Total unduplicated students by state or jurisdiction, 2016–2022**



## ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, “Secretary DeVos Expands Second Chance Pell Experiment, More than Doubling Opportunities for Incarcerated Students to Gain Job Skills and Earn Postsecondary Credentials,” press release (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, April 24, 2020), <https://perma.cc/2UXK-JDXT>. Although 67 colleges were initially selected, 63 colleges in the first cohort remained in the Experimental Sites Initiative through to the second round of college selection. U.S. Department of Education, “U.S. Department of Education Announces It Will Expand the Second Chance Pell Experiment for the 2022-2023 Award Year,” press release (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, July 30, 2021), <https://perma.cc/TJS8-U3GK>. A list of colleges in each cohort and a list of currently participating colleges can be found at <https://experimentalsites.ed.gov/exp/approved.html>.
- 2 Out of the 200 colleges selected to participate in SCP, 101 colleges did not have students funded through SCP during the 2021–2022 financial aid year. Most of these 101 programs were from colleges in the third cohort. The third cohort was initiated in April 2022, so these colleges did not have time to enroll SCP students during the 2021–2022 financial aid year. There were an additional 24 colleges that did not respond to the survey or were unable to provide data.
- 3 For further information about the FAFSA Simplification Act, see Juan Martinez-Hill, *A Monumental Shift: Restoring Access to Pell Grants for Incarcerated Students* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021), <https://perma.cc/2D4E-P2HE>. For further information about Pell restoration regulations, see Myra Hyder, *Accessing Pell Grants for College Programs in Correctional Settings: A Summary of the Regulations and Requirements* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), <https://perma.cc/GL9M-WD45>.
- 4 Carmen Heider and Karen Lehman, “Education and Transformation: An Argument for College in Prison,” *Critical Education* 10, no. 9 (2019), 1–13, <https://perma.cc/5UQZ-JAS8>.
- 5 Susan Sturm and Vivian Nixon, *Home-Grown Social Capital: How Higher Education for Formerly Incarcerated Women Facilitates Family and Community Transformation* (Washington, DC: Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2015), 34–37, <https://perma.cc/8U65-NEMS>.
- 6 Goldie Blumenstyk, “By 2020, They Said, 2 Out of 3 Jobs Would Need More Than a High-School Diploma. Were They Right?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 22, 2020, <https://perma.cc/P6BK-K7V7>.
- 7 Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, “Incarceration & Social Inequality,” *Daedalus* 139, no. 3 (2010), Figure 1, <https://perma.cc/V6V8-ZX2Y>; Ruth Delaney, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames, and Nicholas Turner, *Reimagining Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), 16, <https://perma.cc/2RHD-VUCK>.
- 8 Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Lois Davis, and Susan Turner, “Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14, no. 3 (2018), 389–428, <https://perma.cc/NKE4-KDFK>. The authors note

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## About citations

As researchers and readers alike increasingly rely on public knowledge made available online, “link rot” has become a widely acknowledged problem for creating useful and sustainable citations. To address this issue, the Vera Institute of Justice is experimenting with the use of Perma.cc (<https://perma.cc>), a service that helps scholars, journals, and courts create permanent links to the online sources cited in their work.

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in their abstract that all types of education, on average, lower recidivism by 28 percent among participants. When looking specifically at postsecondary education, the odds ratio of recidivism among postsecondary students versus those who did not participate is 0.52, or a 48% ( $1.00 - 0.52 = 0.48$ ) reduction in the odds of recidivism. (See Table 3.)

- 9 Amanda Pompoco, John Woolredge, Melissa Lugo, et al., “Reducing Inmate Misconduct and Prison Returns with Facility Education Programs,” *Criminology & Public Policy* 16, no. 2 (2017), 515–547, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1745-9133.12290>.
- 10 Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2017), <https://perma.cc/C3FG-KJUL>. Further discussion of RAND’s research portfolio on correctional education is available at <https://perma.cc/SR9R-8HQC>. For further discussion of cost savings associated with postsecondary education, also see Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), <https://perma.cc/YP7W-UJ2J>.
- 11 E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2021-Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), 1, <https://perma.cc/UL2J-ZK5L>.
- 12 Ibid., 13-16.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 “Hispanic” is most often used to refer to a person whose ancestry includes a country where Spanish is the primary or dominant language, and “Latino” (for men only or groups with multiple genders) or “Latina” (for women only) is used to refer to a person with ancestry from a country in Latin America. However, these categories are combined in this data brief to conform to how the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System collect and report on race and ethnicity. Both systems define Hispanic/Latino to be mutually exclusive of other race/ethnicity categories.
- 15 Second Chance Pell Initiative data for the financial aid year 2021–2022 (from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022) is compared to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data for people incarcerated in U.S. prisons during the 2021 calendar year (January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021). Because the financial aid year and the calendar year do not fully overlap, they are compared, as the BJS 2021 data reflects the number of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons at the start of the financial aid year and is the most recent data available as of the publication of this report. Carson, *Prisoners in 2021*.
- 16 Methodology for this statistic: Vera’s *Investing in Futures* report found that 64 percent of people in federal and state prisons are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary education program, meaning that at the time of incarceration, their highest level of educational attainment was a GED or high school diploma. Oakford, Brumfield, Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures*, 2019, p. 1. Under the FAFSA Simplification Act, incarcerated people are eligible for Pell Grants regardless of sentence length. As of the end of 2021, the state and federal prison population was 1,199,642, per Vera’s *People in Prison in Winter 2021-2022* factsheet. Therefore, Vera researchers estimate that at least 767,770 people will become eligible when Pell access expands in July 2023. Jacob Kang-Brown, *People in Prison in Winter 2021-2022* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), 3, <https://perma.cc/M6KT-VZK3>.