

PULSE OF CHANGE

EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL ACCESS
IN CALIFORNIA WOMEN'S PRISONS



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All illustrations are by PARLP member Laura Lutrell Purviance.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the importance of higher education in prisons has gained significant attention. Programs aimed at providing educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals have demonstrated promising results in terms of rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rates. These initiatives not only offer a pathway to personal growth and skill development but also contribute to the overall well-being and future success of individuals upon their release.

This report, led by Unapologetically HERS (Healing Experiences through Research Solutions), aims to transform educational opportunities within carceral settings through participatory action research conducted in partnership with incarcerated community researchers. The focus is on understanding the educational experiences and challenges faced by incarcerated individuals at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in Corona, CA.

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of higher education within CIW, highlighting the demand for educational opportunities and the significant barriers that inhibit these aspirations. By shedding light on these issues, the report seeks to propose actionable recommendations to enhance access to higher education and improve the overall educational environment within the prison.

The scope of this report is confined to the educational experiences at the California Institution for Women, providing insights and findings specific to this institution. While this research was conducted at one institution, experience allows for the extrapolation of conclusions and recommendations to the other CA women's state prison.

The California Institute for Women's (CIW) population currently stands at approximately 1179 individuals, while the Central California Women's Facility has an approximate population of 2218.

Our findings revealed that approximately 5.26% of the total CIW prison population are currently assigned to educational programs based on the provided data.

This engagement rate of 5.26% suggests there may be significant room for improvement in educational program participation within CIW. Addressing potential barriers, improving awareness, and expanding program capacity could help increase this percentage, offering broader benefits to those incarcerated and society.

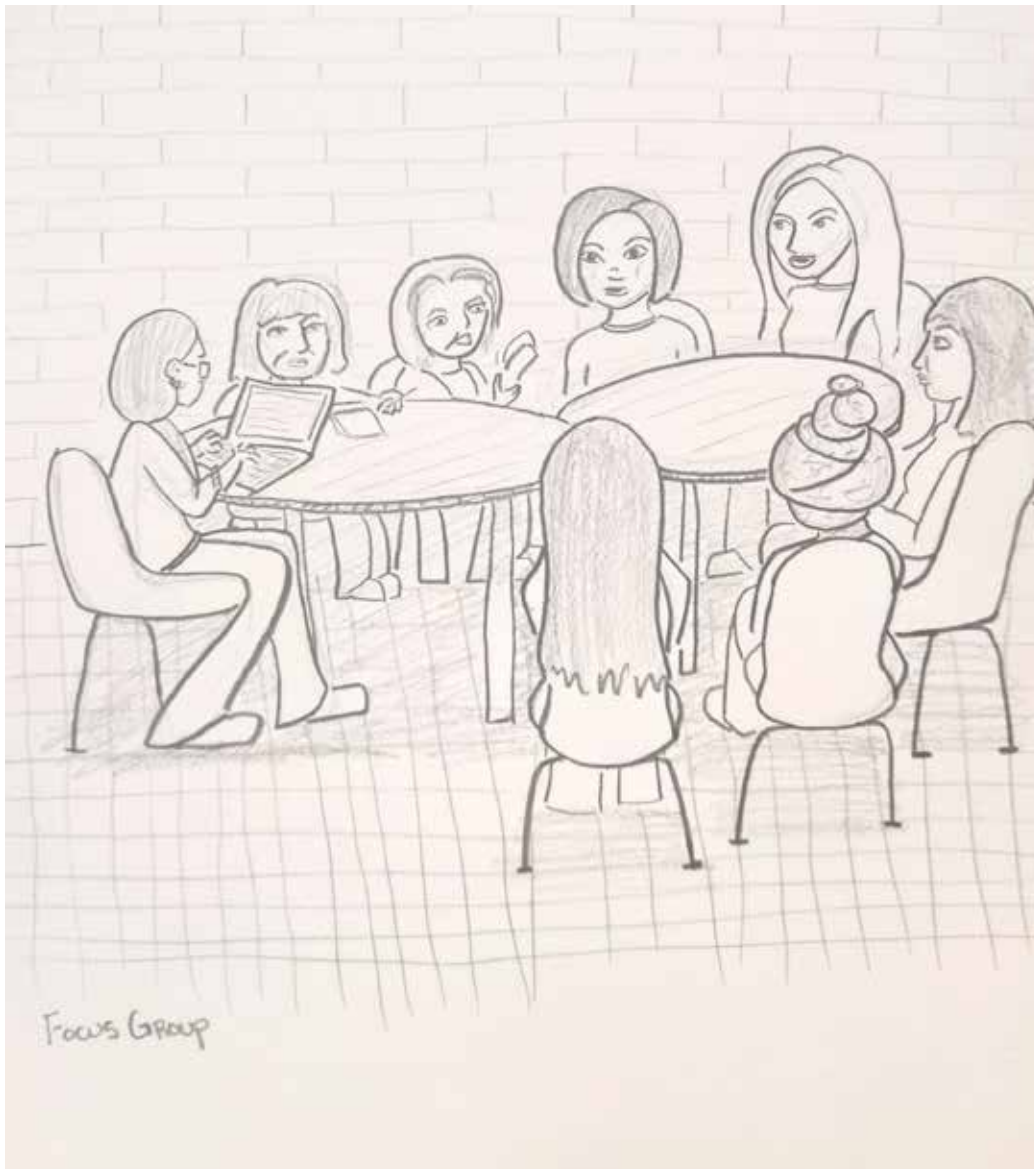
The relevance of higher education in prisons cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that participation in these programs leads to improved academic and vocational skills, increased employment prospects upon release, and reduced rates of recidivism. Moreover, higher education programs contribute to improved mental health, increased self-esteem, and a greater sense of purpose among incarcerated

INTRODUCTION

individuals. This report underscores the critical role of education in fostering rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

The findings presented in this report are based on extensive surveys and focus group discussions conducted with incarcerated individuals at CIW. Utilizing a participatory action research approach, this study ensured active involvement and insights from the incarcerated community, making the research both comprehensive and reflective of the participants' real-life experiences.

By addressing the barriers to higher education in prisons and implementing the recommended changes, we can significantly improve the educational landscape for incarcerated individuals, promoting rehabilitation, reducing recidivism, and facilitating successful reintegration into society.



OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Core Principles of Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to research that actively involves all stakeholders in the research process. The core principles of PAR include:

- **Participation:** PAR emphasizes the active involvement of participants in all stages of the research process, from problem identification to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.
- **Action orientation:** PAR aims to generate knowledge that can be directly applied to address real-world problems and bring about positive social change.
- **Reflexivity:** PAR encourages researchers to critically examine their own assumptions, biases, and power dynamics, and to work in partnership with participants to co-create knowledge.
- **Empowerment:** PAR seeks to empower marginalized or underrepresented groups by giving them a voice and a role in the research process.
- **Iterative process:** PAR is an iterative process that involves cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, with the goal of continuously improving the research and its outcomes.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISONS

General Background, Importance, and Outcomes

Higher education programs in prisons have a long history, dating back to the early 20th century. These programs are widely recognized as essential tools for rehabilitation, reducing recidivism, and providing incarcerated individuals with opportunities for personal growth and skill development.

Historical Context

The concept of providing higher education in prisons began to take shape in the early 1900s, with various state initiatives aimed at rehabilitating incarcerated individuals through education. The movement gained significant momentum in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly with the introduction of the Pell Grant program in 1972, which made federal financial aid available to incarcerated students. This support was instrumental in expanding access to higher education across U.S. prisons until the mid-1990s when eligibility for Pell Grants was rescinded for incarcerated individuals. The landscape shifted again in 2015 with the launch of the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, which reintroduced Pell Grants for incarcerated students, significantly boosting participation in postsecondary education programs within prisons.



IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON

- 1. Rehabilitation and Personal Development:** Higher education serves as a powerful rehabilitative tool. Incarcerated individuals who participate in higher education programs report transformative experiences that foster new identities, perspectives, and goals. Education promotes self-reflection, personal improvement, and provides the knowledge and skills necessary for successful reintegration into society.
- 2. Reduction in Recidivism:** Numerous studies have demonstrated that higher education in prisons significantly reduces recidivism rates. Incarcerated individuals who engage in postsecondary education programs are 48% less likely to return to prison compared to those who do not participate in such programs. This reduction in recidivism translates to safer communities and reduced incarceration costs for taxpayers.
- 3. Enhanced Employment Prospects:** Education increases employability. By 2027, it is projected that 70% of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training beyond high school. Prison education programs provide incarcerated individuals with the credentials and skills necessary to secure employment upon release, thus aiding in their successful reentry into the community.
- 4. Improved Mental Health and Self-Esteem:** Participation in higher education programs is linked to improved mental health outcomes, including increased self-esteem and a greater sense of purpose. These benefits contribute to overall well-being and stability, both during incarceration and after release.
- 5. Community and Family Impact:** The benefits of higher education extend beyond the individual. Educated individuals are better equipped to contribute positively to their communities and provide support and inspiration to their families. This ripple effect can lead to broader social and economic improvements within communities affected by high rates of incarceration.
- 6. Public Safety and Institutional Safety:** Prisons with active postsecondary education programs experience fewer violent incidents, creating safer environments for both staff and incarcerated individuals. The educational engagement promotes a culture of learning and personal development, which can reduce tensions and conflicts within prison facilities.
- 7. Economic Benefits:** Investing in prison education yields significant economic returns. Research indicates that every dollar invested in prison-based education results in a return of more than four dollars in reduced incarceration costs. This economic benefit underscores the value of expanding educational opportunities within prisons.

Outcomes of Higher Education in Prisons

The positive outcomes of higher education in prisons are well-documented. The Second Chance Pell Initiative, for example, has demonstrated considerable success, with over 40,000 students participating in postsecondary education funded through the program between 2016 and 2022. During the 2021-2022 financial aid year, students earned nearly 3,000 credentials, including associate's and bachelor's degrees, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, higher education in prisons is a critical component of the rehabilitation process. It offers substantial benefits to incarcerated individuals, their families, and society at large by reducing recidivism, enhancing employment prospects, improving mental health, and generating economic returns. As such, continued support and expansion of these programs are essential for fostering successful reintegration and reducing the overall burden of incarceration on society.

KEY FINDINGS

The Participatory Action Research Leadership Program (PARLP), spearheaded by Unapologetically HERS, conducted a comprehensive study to examine the educational experiences and barriers faced by incarcerated individuals in California women's prisons. This study incorporated both survey data and focus group discussions, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and aspirations of the incarcerated population regarding access to higher education.

Key Demographic Insights

- 1. Diverse Age and Gender Demographics:** The survey revealed that 48% of respondents are aged between 41-61 years, with an additional 11% over 61, indicating a mature demographic with unique educational needs. The population is overwhelmingly female (94%), with 5% identifying as gender fluid, gender non-conforming, or queer, and 2% as transgender men. This diversity underscores the necessity for age-appropriate and gender-responsive educational programs.
- 2. Racial and Ethnic Diversity:** The population includes 37% identifying as White/European, 24% as Latina/Chicana, and 20% as Black/African American. Smaller groups include Native American/Indigenous (5%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (3%). This diversity necessitates culturally inclusive educational content that respects and integrates the varied backgrounds of the incarcerated population.

KEY FINDINGS

Educational Background and Aspirations

- 1. Prior Education Levels:** Before incarceration, 51% of respondents had completed high school, with 16% holding a GED. A smaller percentage had engaged in higher education, with 12% holding vocational certificates and 9% having completed an associate degree.
- 2. Engagement in Education During Incarceration:** During their time in prison, 44% of respondents have engaged in higher education courses, primarily towards an associate degree. Vocational certificates (18%) and GEDs (16%) are also common, indicating a significant focus on both vocational and foundational education.
- 3. High Desire for Further Education:** A striking 91% of respondents expressed a desire to further their education, with many aiming for bachelor's (24%) and master's degrees (19%). This high level of interest demonstrates the importance of providing accessible and supportive educational programs within the carceral environment.

Major Barriers to Education

- 1. Inadequate Resources and Infrastructure:** Respondents frequently mentioned the lack of essential educational resources such as books, learning materials, and quiet places to study. The absence of dedicated study areas significantly hampers their ability to focus and succeed in their studies.
- 2. Scheduling Conflicts:** A critical issue identified is the conflict between mealtimes and educational activities, forcing individuals to choose between eating and attending classes or study halls. This scheduling conflict affects their ability to stay nourished and focused on learning.
- 3. Limited Access to Support Services:** Many respondents indicated a need for more robust academic and psychological support services, including tutoring, counseling, and structured study times. Non-English speakers face additional barriers due to inadequate language support and poorly translated materials.
- 4. Policy and Administrative Barriers:** Existing policies that tie educational access to sentence length and prioritize non-educational work assignments over educational activities create significant barriers. Long waiting lists for educational programs further exacerbates the issue.
- 5. Systemic Issues and Toxic Environment:** Focus groups highlighted systemic issues such as punitive policies, inconsistent administrative practices, and a toxic educational atmosphere that diminishes the educational experience and success rates.

METHODS

Recruitment & Participants

The recruitment process was spearheaded by (08) Participatory Action Research Leadership Program (PARLP) Community Researchers at the California Institution for Women (CIW). These researchers, who are themselves incarcerated individuals, utilized their networks within the facility to engage their peers in the research process. The approach was designed to ensure the research question was grounded in the real needs and experiences of the incarcerated population. Stakeholders involved in the project were actively involved in identifying and selecting the research question, which ensured a high level of relevance and engagement from the participants.

Focus Group Sessions

Six focus groups were conducted in-person at CIW, each consisting of 5-6 stakeholders. These sessions provided a platform for in-depth discussions about the educational aspirations and barriers faced by the participants. Community Researchers facilitated these groups, providing snacks as a token of appreciation, which helped create a comfortable and cooperative environment for the stakeholders. The setting enabled participants to openly share their experiences and insights, which were crucial for the depth and authenticity of the research findings.

Survey Data Collection

The survey tool was collaboratively developed by the Community Researchers and other incarcerated individuals to ensure that it was both comprehensive and sensitive to the specific context of their educational experiences and needs. Over 100 surveys were disseminated throughout CIW by the Community Researchers, which helped to maximize participation by leveraging existing relationships and trust within the community.

Data Analysis

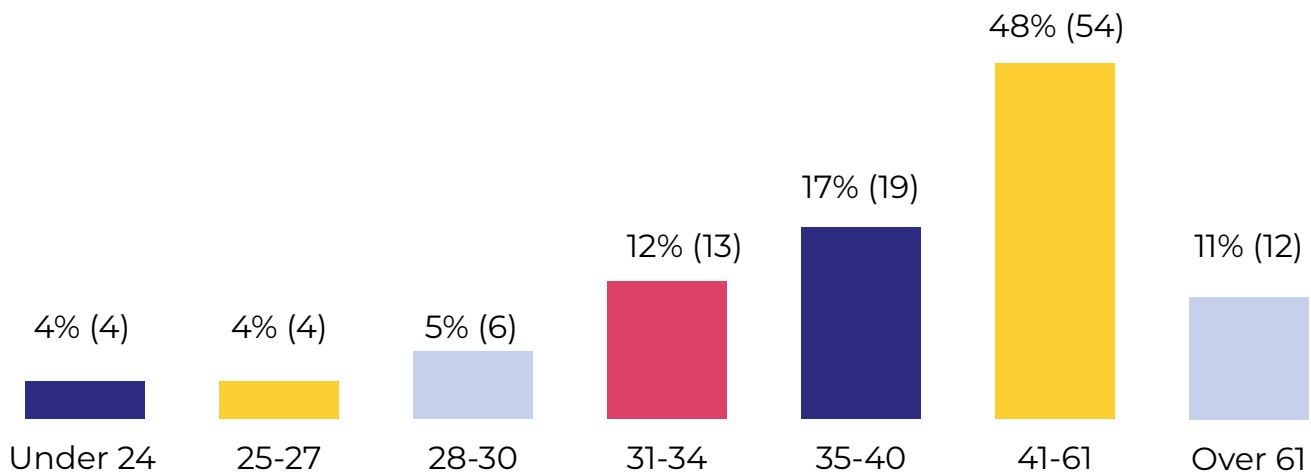
Data from the surveys and focus groups were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and thematic analysis. Researchers employed techniques such as restructuring, summarizing, categorizing, and visualizing the data to draw meaningful insights. Key to this process was the use of pivot tables, which allowed for a detailed cross-tabulation analysis. It enabled the team to identify and elaborate on patterns and relationships within the data, particularly how different variables interacted with each other in relation to educational aspirations and barriers.

SURVEY RESULTS

Demographics and Background

Distribution of Ages Among Incarcerated Individuals

The age distribution of respondents highlights a predominant group aged 41-61 years, accounting for 48% of the population surveyed. This suggests a mature demographic with potentially different educational needs and aspirations compared to younger incarcerated individuals.

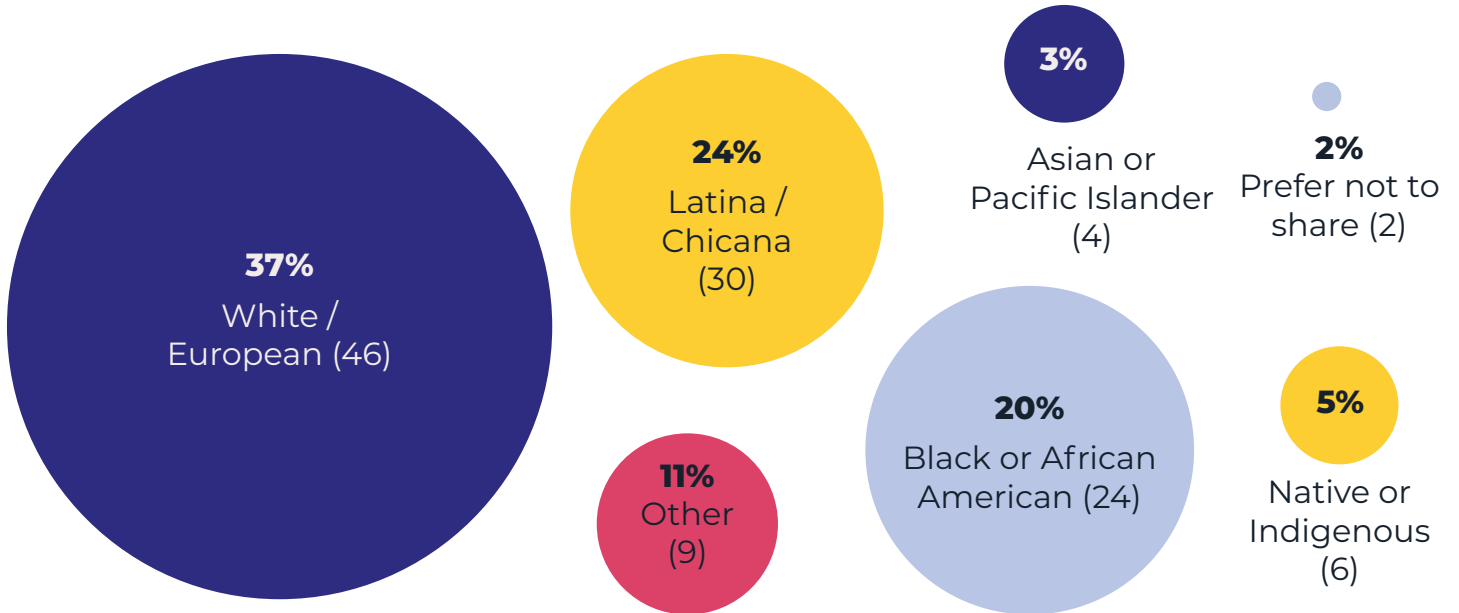


The survey also records 11% of participants over the age of 61, indicating a presence of older individuals who remain interested in educational pursuits, emphasizing the importance of accessible lifelong learning opportunities within the carceral system.



Ethnic and Racial Demographics of the Incarcerated Population

Racial and ethnic data reveal a diverse cohort with 37% identifying as White/European, followed by 24% as Latina/Chicana, and 20% as Black/African American. This diversity necessitates culturally inclusive educational programs that respect and integrate the varied backgrounds of the incarcerated population.

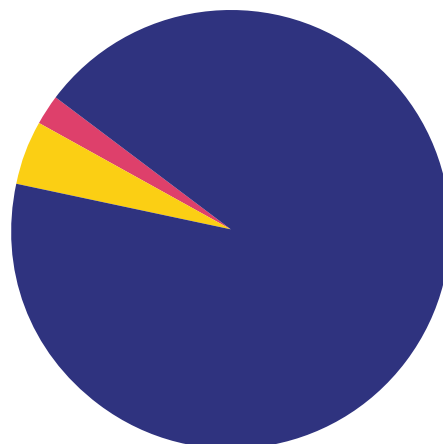


Additionally, the smaller percentages of Native American/Indigenous (5%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (3%) participants highlight the need for targeted support to ensure these groups are not marginalized within educational initiatives.

Gender Identity of Incarcerated Individuals

Gender identity data is overwhelmingly skewed with 94% of respondents identifying as female/woman, coupled with 5% identifying as gender fluid, gender non-conforming, or queer, and 2% as transgender men.

- **94%** Female / Woman (104)
- **5%** Gender Fluid, Gender Non-Conforming / Queer (5)
- **2%** Transgender Man (2)

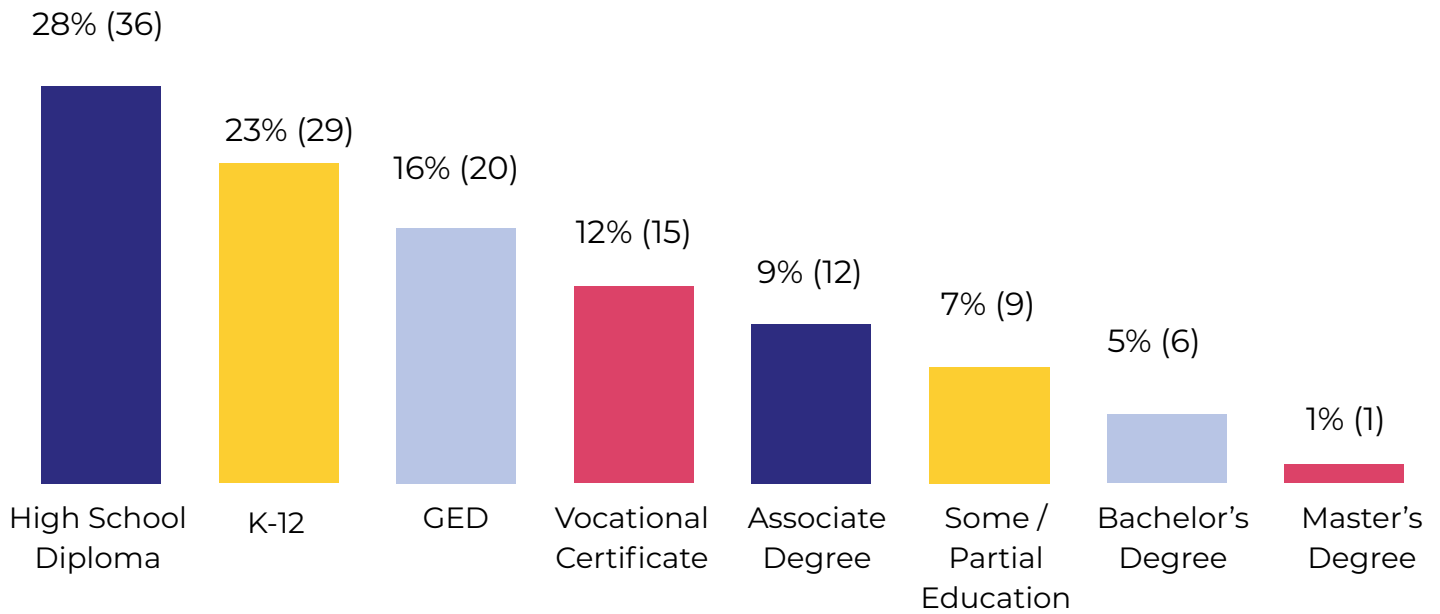


This distribution calls for gender-responsive educational programs that cater specifically to the needs of women and gender-diverse individuals, ensuring equity in access and participation.

Educational Background

Educational Background Prior to Incarceration

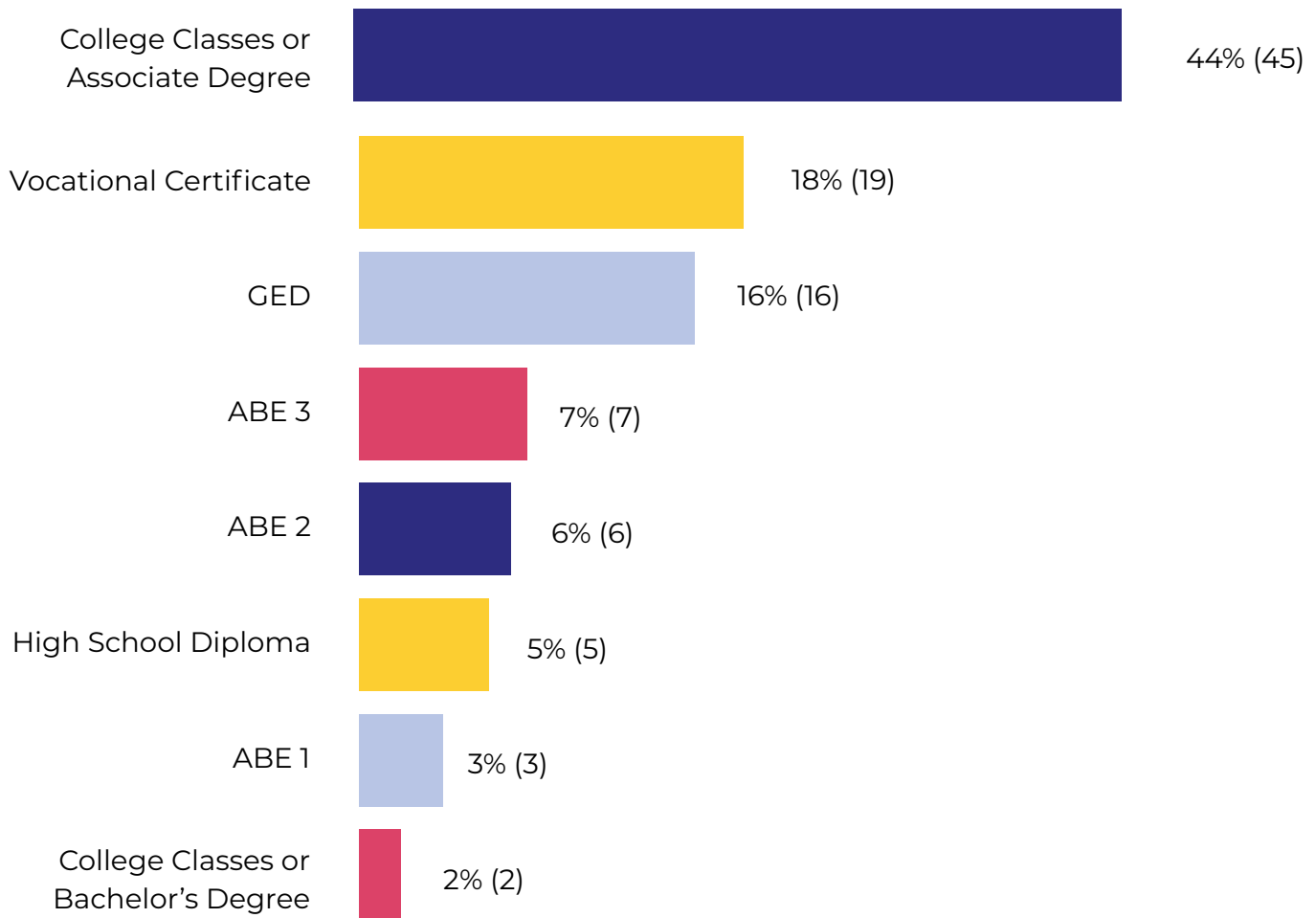
The majority of respondents, 51%, have achieved high school-level education, including those with a high school diploma (28%) and those who reached K-12 levels without graduation (23%). Additionally, 16% possess a GED or General Education Diploma, indicating a significant number of individuals have sought basic educational certification post-incarceration.



A smaller yet notable portion of the population has engaged in higher education or vocational training, with 12% holding vocational certificates and 9% having completed an associate degree. The pursuit of more advanced degrees is less common but present, with 5% holding a bachelor's degree and a minimal 1% attaining a master's degree.

Levels of Education Attained During Incarceration

Remarkably, 44% of the respondents have engaged in higher education, including college classes leading to an Associate Degree. This high participation rate indicates a significant demand and capacity for more advanced educational offerings within the carceral system. Vocational certificates, held by 18% of those surveyed, and GEDs or General Education Diplomas, held by 16%, reflect a substantial focus on vocational and foundational education as key components of rehabilitation and skill development.



Further examination of Adult Basic Education (ABE) levels reveals that 7% have reached ABE 3, indicating a progression to more advanced basic education, while 6% are at ABE 2, and 3% at ABE 1, highlighting ongoing educational engagement at various foundational levels. Only a small fraction, 5%, have obtained a high school diploma while incarcerated, and an even smaller group, 2%, have pursued college classes towards a Bachelor's Degree.

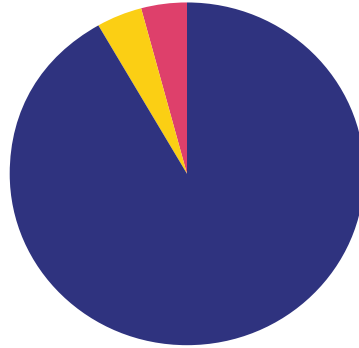
These findings illustrate a clear interest and participation in both vocational and academic education, suggesting a need for expanded access and support for higher educational programs to cater to the diverse aspirations of incarcerated individuals.

Educational Aspirations and Barriers

Desire to Further Education Among Incarcerated Individuals

A significant majority, 91%, express a desire to further their education, demonstrating a strong demand for continued learning opportunities within the carceral environment. This overwhelming interest demonstrates the importance of developing accessible and supportive educational programs tailored to the needs of incarcerated learners.

- **91%** Yes - I want to further my education (102)
- **4%** No - I don't want to further my education (5)
- **4%** Unsure - I'm unsure if I want to further my education (5)

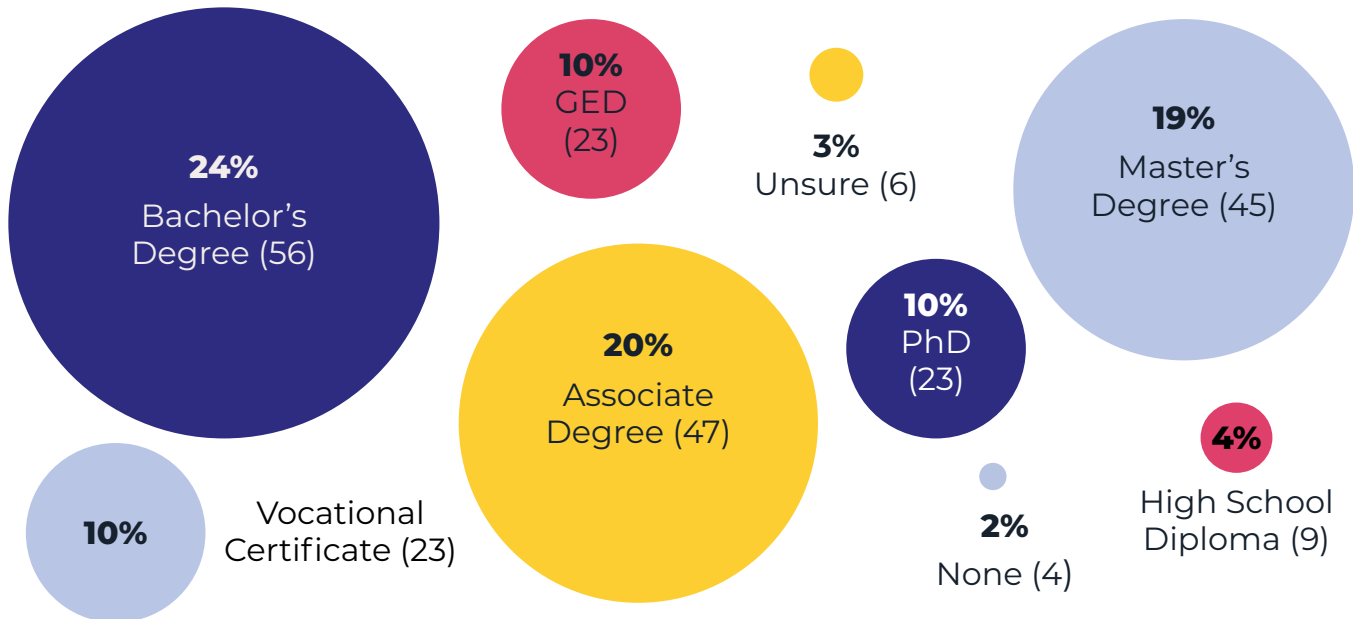


"I feel like I'm leaving a legacy behind. I will be the first one in my family to finish college."

— Focus Group Participant

Educational Aspirations Within the Incarcerated Population

In terms of specific educational goals, there is a diverse range of aspirations. Notably, 24% of respondents aim to pursue a Bachelor's Degree, and close proportions aspire to attain an Associate Degree (20%) or a Master's Degree (19%). These findings indicate a substantial interest in higher education degrees, which suggests that providing access to college-level courses could be a transformative policy for these individuals.

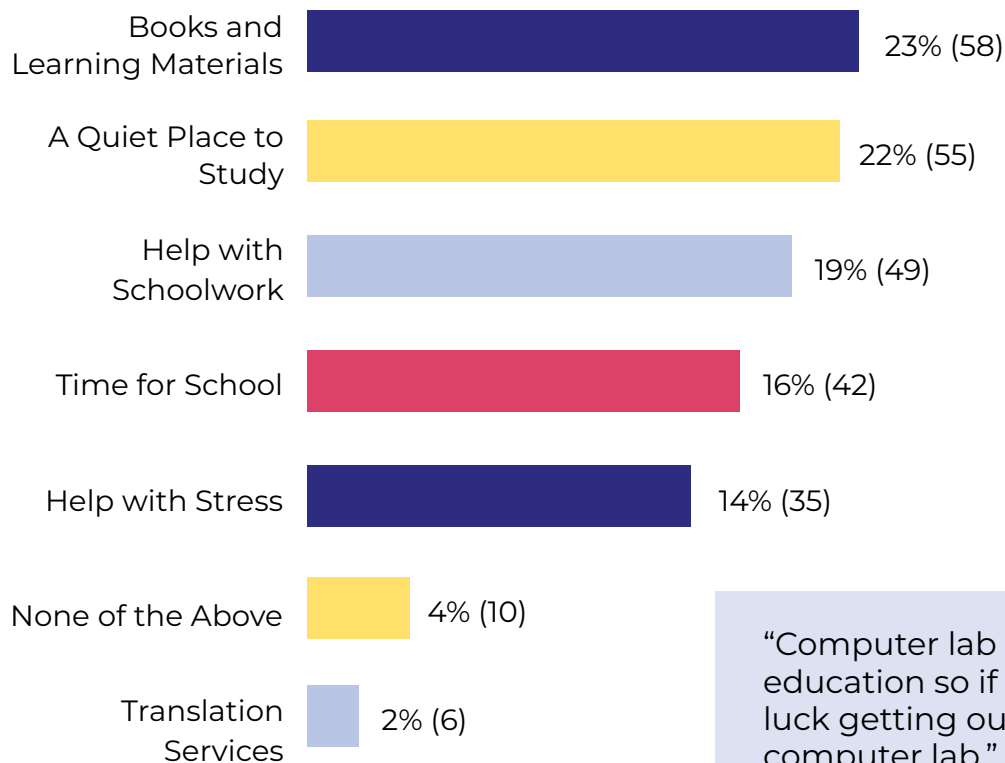


Additionally, 10% each express interest in obtaining a GED or General Education Diploma, vocational certificates, or even a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), highlighting the varied educational objectives among the incarcerated population.

The presence of respondents unsure about furthering their education (4%) or desiring no further education (2%) points to potential areas where additional support and counseling could be beneficial to encourage participation and address individual uncertainties or educational disengagement.

Needs for Pursuing Higher Education

The primary requirements identified include access to books and learning materials (23%) and a quiet place to study (22%). These two factors are essential for creating a conducive learning environment, highlighting the logistical challenges faced by incarcerated students in acquiring resources and finding adequate study spaces.



“Having a quiet space to study is critical.”

— Focus Group Participant

“Computer lab is the same hours as education so if you have a job, good luck getting out of your job to go to the computer lab.”

— Focus Group Participant

Additionally, 19% of respondents seek help with schoolwork, indicating a need for more robust academic support systems such as tutoring and educational guidance. Time management is another significant barrier, with 16% of respondents noting the need for time allocated specifically for educational pursuits. This is further complicated by the structured schedules within carceral facilities, which often do not prioritize educational programming. Stress management support was also noted by 14% of the participants, underscoring the psychological burdens that may impede academic performance.

Open-ended responses further emphasize these challenges, with numerous calls for the recognition of educational activities as official programming within the carceral system. This would alleviate conflicts between work assignments and class schedules, thereby supporting full-time student engagement.

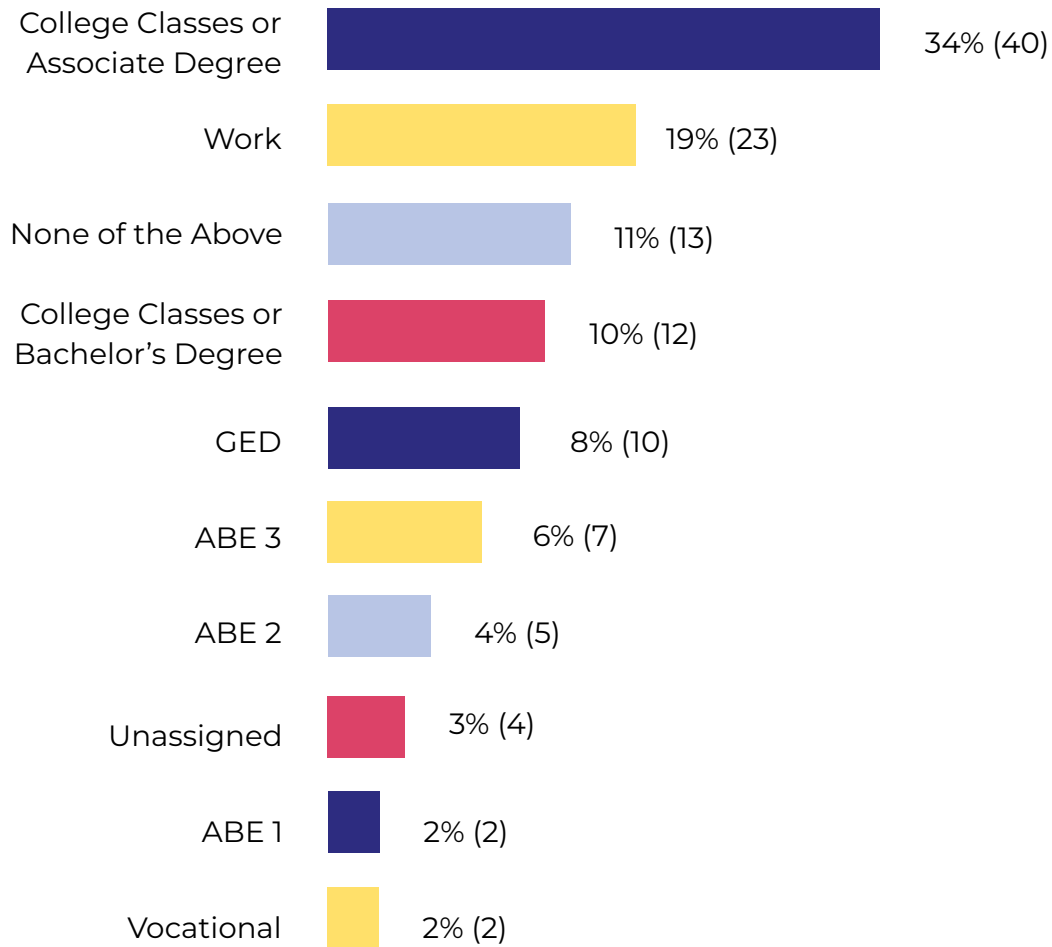
Moreover, there is a strong appeal for improvements in the physical and administrative support for education, including consistent access to materials, internet connectivity, and a reform of work requirements that compete with study time.

Collectively, these insights advocate for structured reforms to enhance the educational infrastructure and policies in prisons, ensuring that higher education is a viable and supported option for incarcerated individuals.

Current Educational Assignments and Waiting Lists

Types of Educational Assignments

The survey reveals that a significant portion of incarcerated individuals are engaged in educational activities, with 34% enrolled in college classes pursuing an Associate Degree. This substantial participation indicates the value placed on higher education as a means for personal development and reintegration preparation. Notably, another 10% are enrolled in college classes for a Bachelor's Degree, combining to almost half of the respondents being active in higher education courses.



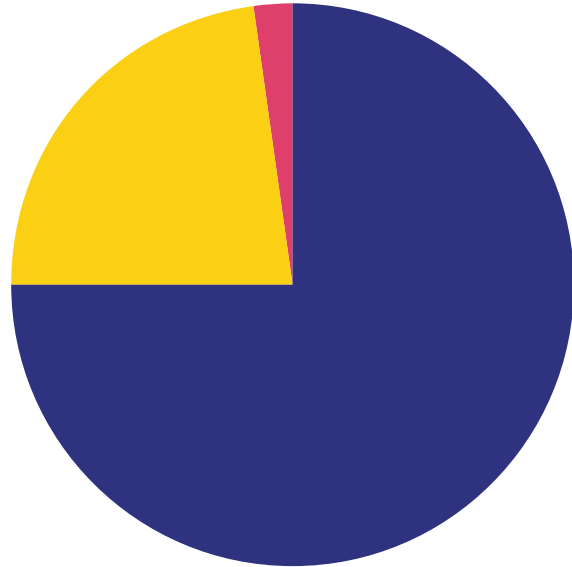
Conversely, 19% of the respondents are assigned to work, highlighting a potential conflict between employment obligations and educational opportunities. The fact that 11% of individuals are not assigned to any activities suggests underutilized potential or gaps in program availability.

Furthermore, foundational education remains critical, with 8% pursuing a GED or General Education Diploma and an additional 12% engaged in various levels of Adult Basic Education (ABE). The relatively low participation (2%) in vocational training indicates a possible area for expansion, considering the practical benefits of vocational skills in post-incarceration employment scenarios.

Educational Waiting List Status

The survey findings shed light on the significant barriers incarcerated individuals face in accessing educational opportunities, particularly the presence of waiting lists for various programs. Notably, 23% of respondents report being on a waiting list for educational offerings, illustrating a clear gap between the demand and availability of educational resources within the carceral setting.

- **75%** No - I am not currently on a waiting list for education (83)
- **23%** Yes - I am currently on a waiting list for education (25)
- **2%** Unsure - I'm unsure if I am on a waiting list for education (2)



The majority of those not on waiting lists (75%) perhaps reflect either a lack of interest or awareness of available educational opportunities, or potentially an indication that many have already secured a place in educational programs.

However, the breakdown of specific educational programs for which individuals are waiting reveals critical insights: 13% are awaiting entry into college classes for an Associate Degree and vocational certificates, and a smaller percentage (6%) are waiting for Bachelor's Degree programs.

The low percentage (2%) waiting for GED or General Education Diploma programs may suggest relatively better availability of these foundational educational services compared to higher education options.

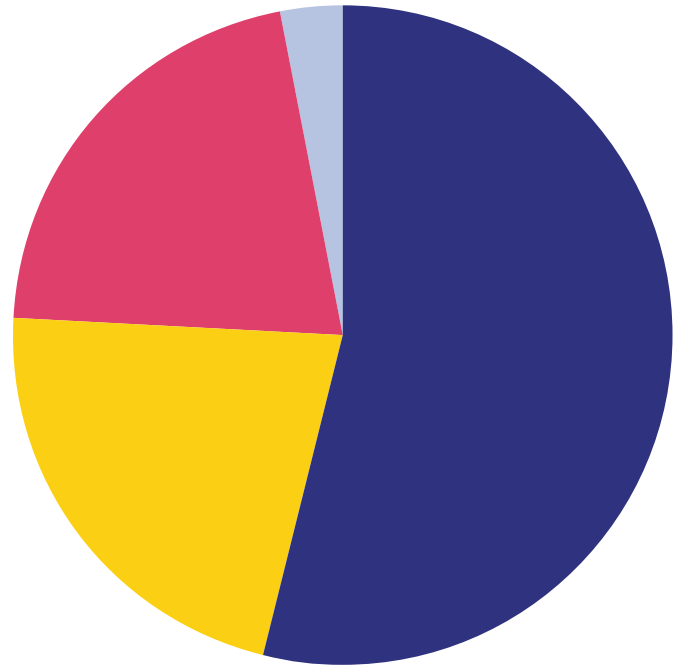
These findings suggest a pressing need for the expansion of educational programs within prisons to reduce wait times and meet the educational aspirations of incarcerated individuals.

Obstacles to Education

Projected Time Available to Achieve Educational Goals

Over half (54%) of the respondents believe they have enough time remaining in their sentences to meet their educational objectives, suggesting a positive alignment between the duration of incarceration and the availability of educational programs. However, a concerning 22% feel they do not have enough time left, which highlights a critical barrier that could impede their educational and subsequent reintegration success.

- **54%** Yes - I have enough time left to serve in order to finish my educational goals (58)
- **22%** No - I do not have enough time left to serve in order to finish my educational goals (24)
- **21%** Unsure - I'm unsure if I have enough time left to serve to finish my educational goals (22)
- **3%** Doesn't Apply - The question of having enough time left to serve does not apply to my situation



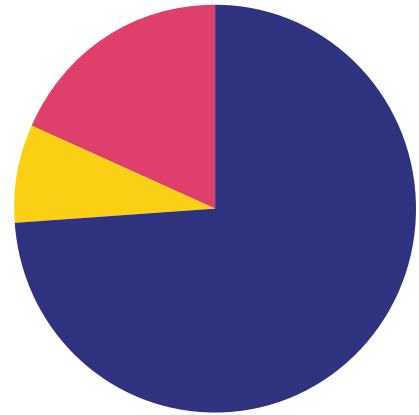
Additionally, a notable 21% of respondents are unsure about the sufficiency of time available to them, indicating uncertainty and possibly a lack of information or support in planning their educational pathways. This uncertainty can contribute to anxiety and decreased motivation towards pursuing education while incarcerated. The small percentage (3%) for whom this question does not apply might represent those serving shorter sentences or those not engaged in educational pursuits.

These insights point to the need for educational planning and advisement within carceral settings, ensuring that all incarcerated individuals have a clear understanding and realistic pathway to achieve their educational goals within their sentence timelines.

Time Constraints on Education by Prison Staff

A relatively small proportion of respondents (9%) report that staff have informed them they do not have enough time remaining on their sentences to pursue their educational goals. While this figure may seem minor, it represents a significant impediment for those affected, potentially discouraging educational engagement and progress.

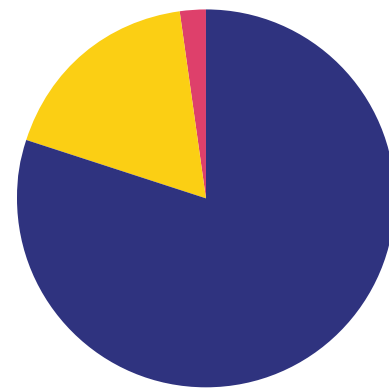
- **85%** No - I have not been told by staff that I do not have enough time remaining on my sentence to pursue my educational goals (94)
- **9%** Yes - I have been told by staff that I do not have enough time remaining on my sentence to pursue my educational goals (10)
- **21%** Unsure - I'm unsure if I have been told by staff that I do not have enough time remaining on my sentence to pursue my educational goals (6)



Influence of Sentence Length on Educational Opportunities

More concerning, 18% of the participants have been explicitly told they are not prioritized for educational programs due to the length of their sentences. This indicates a systemic issue where sentence duration could be used as a criterion to limit access to educational opportunities, thereby affecting a substantial number of individuals who could otherwise benefit from such programs.

- **81%** No - I have not been told by staff that I'm not prioritized to participate in education due to the length of my sentence (87)
- **18%** Yes - I have been told by staff that I'm not prioritized to participate in education due to the length of my sentence (19)
- **2%** Unsure - I'm unsure if I have been told by staff that I'm not prioritized to participate in education due to the length of my sentence (2)



"I wasn't afforded a higher education; custody level decided educational opportunity."

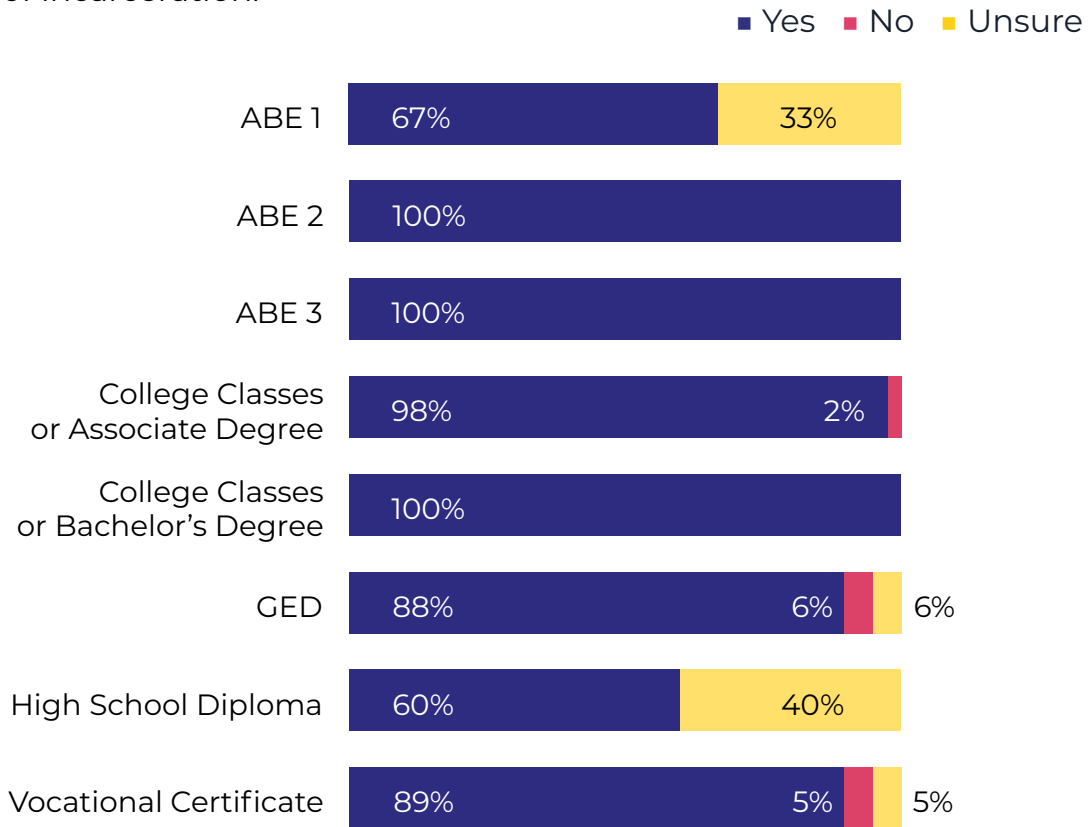
— Focus Group Participant

Conversely, a large majority of incarcerated individuals (85% and 81% respectively) have not received such communications, which might suggest that while the policy may not be broadly applied, its selective enforcement could contribute to inconsistencies and perceptions of unfairness within the educational system in carceral settings.

These findings call for a review of policies regarding educational access in prisons, emphasizing the need to ensure that all incarcerated individuals have equal opportunities to engage in educational activities, regardless of their sentence length.

Current Education Level vs. Educational Aspirations

The survey data illustrates a strong correlation between the current education levels of incarcerated individuals and their interest in pursuing further education. Across all educational categories, there is a high percentage of respondents expressing a desire to advance their education, pointing to a widespread commitment to learning despite the constraints of incarceration.



Individuals at the foundational Adult Basic Education (ABE) levels show varying degrees of certainty about their educational aspirations. For example, 67% of those at ABE 1 level are sure they want to continue their education, but 33% remain unsure, indicating a potential need for additional support and encouragement at this introductory level. Conversely, those at ABE 2 and ABE 3 levels display unanimous interest (100%) in further education, suggesting that as individuals progress through basic education levels, their confidence in and commitment to continuing education strengthens.

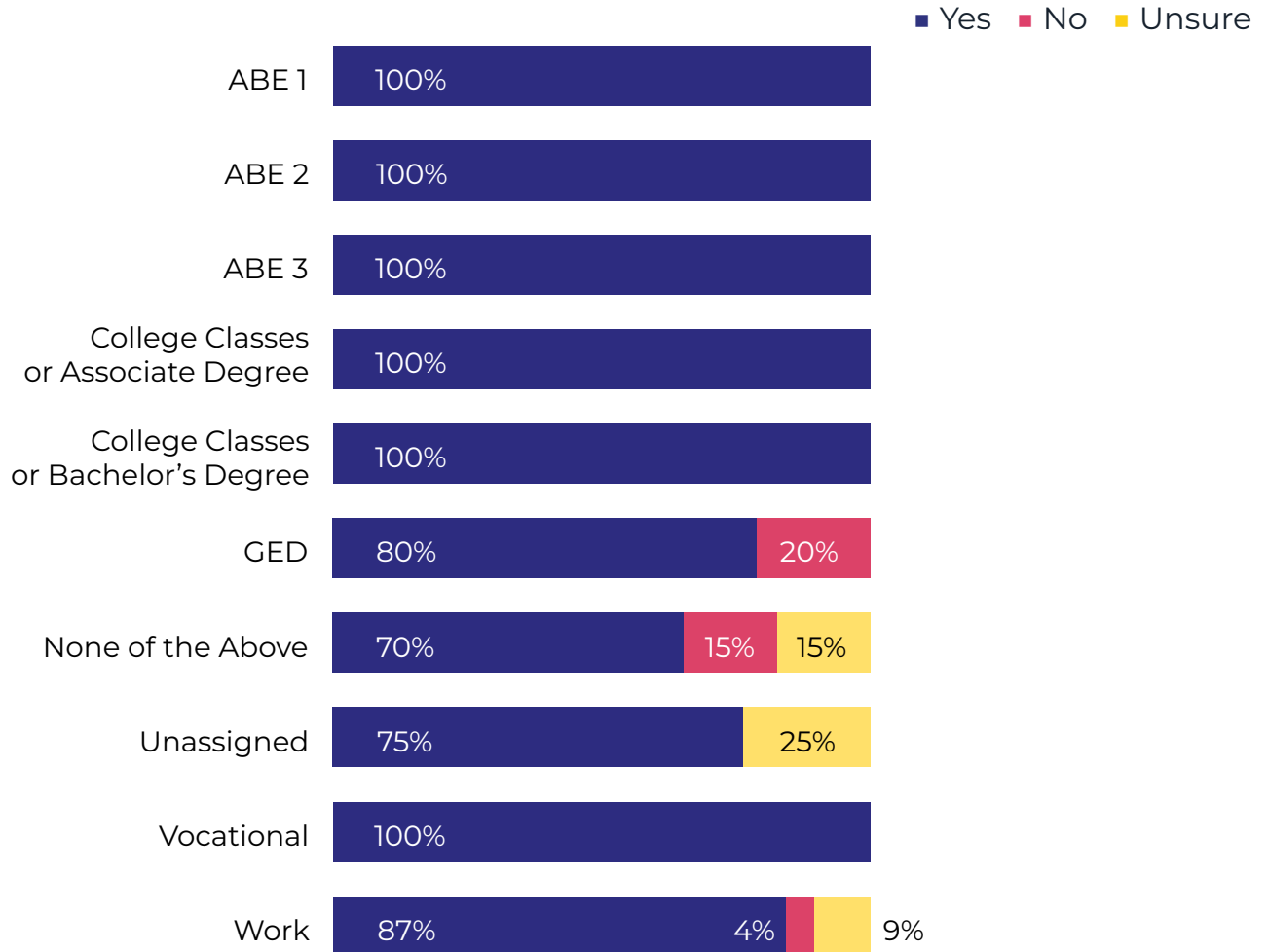
The commitment to further education is notably strong among those already engaged in higher education levels. Respondents in college classes pursuing an Associate Degree and those pursuing a Bachelor's Degree both show nearly universal interest in continuing education (98% and 100%, respectively). This trend is slightly less pronounced but still substantial among those with a GED or General Education Diploma, where 88% express a desire to continue their education.

Interestingly, those with a high school diploma show a considerable percentage of uncertainty (40%), the highest among all groups surveyed. This indicates that while high school completion is a significant achievement, it may also be a point where individuals reassess their educational goals and potential pathways.

For those with vocational certificates, 89% wish to further their education, reflecting the recognition of the value of ongoing learning even after achieving specific skill-based certifications.

Educational Aspirations vs. Current Educational Assignments

A striking aspect of the findings is the universal desire for further education among those engaged in any level of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and those enrolled in college courses, both for Associate and Bachelor's degrees, where 100% of respondents expressed a desire to continue their education. This demonstrates a high level of commitment to learning among those already participating in educational programs.



However, disparities emerge particularly among those assigned to non-educational tasks or with no assignments. While 80% of individuals pursuing a GED are interested in furthering their education, 20% do not share this interest, which might reflect uncertainties about the value or attainability of further education. Moreover, 69% of those with no specific educational or work assignments want to continue their education, but a significant proportion (31%) either do not want to or are unsure, suggesting that lack of engagement could be impacting their educational ambitions.

Most notably, among those assigned to work, 87% still express a desire to pursue education, with only 4% not interested and 9% unsure. This highlights a potentially large pool of individuals who could benefit from increased access to educational programs alongside their work assignments. The 25% of unassigned individuals who are unsure about furthering their education underscores a need for targeted guidance and support to help them recognize and navigate potential educational paths.

Ensuring that educational programs are accessible to all incarcerated individuals, regardless of their current assignments, could significantly enhance their readiness for reintegration into society and reduce recidivism.

Cross Tabulation Analysis of Current Educational Assignments and Waiting Lists

The cross-tabulation analysis examined the relationships between various demographic characteristics and the responses to the questions on current educational assignments and waiting lists. Specifically, the analysis focused on:

Respondents who selected “None of the Above” for their current educational assignments

Demographic Characteristics Analyzed:

- Race/Ethnicity
- Highest level of education prior to incarceration
- Current sentence length
- Age

Key Insights:

- The majority of respondents identified as White/European (5 respondents).
- The most common highest education level prior to prison was GED or General Education Diploma (4 respondents), followed by High School Diploma (3 respondents).
- Respondents had a range of sentence lengths, with the most common being life sentences (4 respondents) and life without parole sentences (3 respondents).
- The age distribution showed a higher concentration of respondents in the 41-61 age group (5 respondents).
- These insights suggest that a substantial number of respondents are in their middle-aged years with longer sentences, which may have implications for their educational and rehabilitative needs within the correctional system.

“I was not a resident of the State a year prior to arrest and due to my sentence, not worth the money. By the time that changed, I didn’t care. I tried to apply when I was 30, now I am 60.”

— Focus Group Participant

Respondents who selected “ABE 1, 2, or 3” for their current educational assignments

Demographic Characteristics Analyzed:

- Race/Ethnicity
- Highest level of education prior to incarceration
- Current sentence length
- Age
- Duration assigned to education

Key Insights:

- The majority of individuals enrolled in ABE levels 1, 2, and 3 are Latina/Chicana (3 respondents).
- Most respondents have their highest level of education as K-12, indicating they did not complete high school before incarceration (4 respondents).
- Respondents exhibit a wide range of sentence lengths, from less than five months to over 25 years, with significant numbers serving lengthy sentences.
- The age distribution among respondents shows varied ages, with individuals falling into different groups such as 35-40 years, 41-61 years, and over 61 years.
- A notable insight is that some individuals have spent 8-10 years in ABE classes, indicating persistent educational needs and potential barriers to progression (2 respondents).
- These findings highlight the need for educational programs that are flexible, adaptable, and evaluated for effectiveness to better support learners in achieving their educational goals in a reasonable timeframe. The extended duration some respondents spend in ABE classes may reflect their progression through ABE levels 1, 2, and 3. Further examination is needed to determine whether this time reflects effective transitions or if other barriers are prolonging their educational journey.

“It’s difficult to think critically without an instructor providing insight to challenge my thoughts.”

— Survey Respondent

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Barriers and Challenges:

The focus groups vividly outlined the educational barriers within the carceral system, which are notably more in-depth than survey responses. Participants expressed frustrations over:

- **Access to Resources:** Limited access to tutors, quiet study areas, and technological resources severely hampers educational efforts. Non-English speakers highlighted significant challenges due to inadequate language support.
- **Systemic Issues:** Participants noted that educational opportunities are often curtailed by punitive policies and inconsistent administrative practices that vary from one warden to another, affecting the continuity and quality of education.
- **Logistical Constraints:** Conflicts between class schedules, meal times, and work assignments, coupled with inadequate policy support for balancing educational pursuits with other institutional obligations, create significant obstacles.



“3 meals a day, so how are you going to tell me I have to skip meals.”

— Focus Group Participant

Opportunities and Goals:

Despite these challenges, participants voiced a strong determination to overcome barriers and achieve educational goals. Their aspirations include:

- **Higher Degrees:** There is a clear desire to pursue higher education, with many aiming for Associate and Bachelor’s degrees, underscoring the importance of expanding college-level courses within prisons.
- **Vocational Training:** Participants also expressed interest in vocational programs that provide practical skills useful post-release, indicating a need for a more varied curriculum that includes job-oriented training alongside academic education

Perceptions of the System:

The focus groups provided deep insights into the perceptions of the carceral education system, characterized by a mix of critique and recognition of its potential transformative impact:

- **Criticism of Policy Inconsistencies:** There was a notable criticism regarding the inconsistency in educational policies and their application, which often depends on administrative changes rather than student needs.
- **Impact of Education:** Many participants shared powerful testimonials about how educational opportunities have profoundly affected their self-perception and aspirations, such as one participant stating, “Once I got my GED, it was like I was capable of anything,” and another noting, “It makes me feel like I can take over the world.”

“Having that balanced breakfast is crucial to being able to learn. Having a balanced lunch helps get you through the day.” — Focus Group Participant

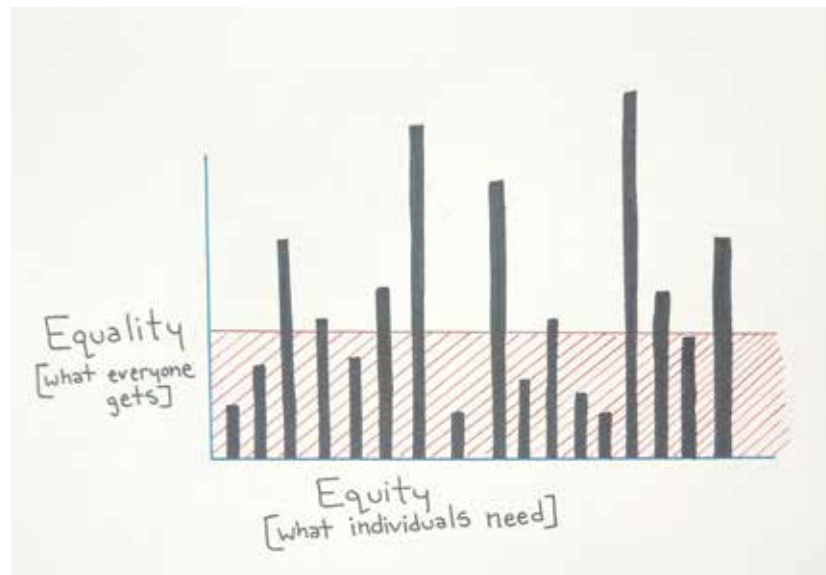
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop Tailored and Culturally Inclusive Educational Programs

- **Insight:** The incarcerated population includes diverse demographics, including older adults, women, gender-diverse individuals, and various racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- **Recommendation:** Implement educational curricula that address the specific learning needs and preferences of different age groups, women, gender-diverse individuals, and racial and ethnic groups to ensure equitable access and engagement.

2. Increase Access to Higher Education Courses

- **Insight:** There is a high interest in pursuing higher education degrees, with many individuals already engaged in or aspiring to attain advanced degrees.
- **Recommendation:** Expand the availability of college courses within prisons, focusing on Bachelor's and Associate degrees, to meet the high demand and assist in achieving higher educational goals.



3. Enhance Support Services and Infrastructure

- **Insight:** Many respondents indicated a need for help with schoolwork, stress management, time management, and quiet places to study.
- **Recommendation:** Strengthen academic and psychological support services, including tutoring, counseling, structured study times, and enhance the provision of educational resources such as libraries, study materials, and designated quiet study areas within prison facilities.

4. Address Meal and Study Hall Scheduling Conflicts

- **Insight:** Many incarcerated individuals face the dilemma of choosing between attending college/study halls and eating their meals.
- **Recommendation:** Implement scheduling reforms to ensure educational activities do not conflict with meal times, providing flexible meal schedules or opportunities to obtain meals outside regular hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Policy Reform for Education During Incarceration

- **Insight:** Constraints due to sentence lengths and prioritization issues hinder access to education.
- **Recommendation:** Advocate for policy changes that eliminate sentence length as a barrier to educational access, officially recognize educational activities as part of rehabilitation programs, and ensure better integration with work assignments and other responsibilities.

6. Reduce Waiting Lists for Educational Programs

- **Insight:** Many individuals are on waiting lists for educational programs, indicating a gap between demand and availability.
- **Recommendation:** Increase funding and resources to expand educational programs, reducing wait times and ensuring more individuals can start their educational journeys promptly.

7. Proactive Engagement and Guidance

- **Insight:** Some individuals are unsure or not interested in further education, possibly due to a lack of understanding of the benefits.
- **Recommendation:** Implement proactive educational counseling and outreach programs to educate individuals about the value and opportunities of further education, targeting those who are unsure or uninterested.

8. Integration of Vocational and Academic Education

- **Insight:** There is a significant interest in both vocational training and advanced academic degrees, suggesting diverse career aspirations.
- **Recommendation:** Develop integrated programs that offer both vocational training and academic education, allowing individuals to tailor their educational paths according to their career goals and personal interests.

9. Enhanced Accessibility and Language Support

- **Insight:** Non-English speakers face significant educational barriers
- **Recommendation:** Improve the availability of tutors, adapt technology for educational use, establish language support and accurate translation services, and provide extended-hour study spaces to accommodate varying schedules.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. Environment and Support Improvements

- **Insight:** The educational environment is often toxic, with negative staff-student interactions and inconsistent policies.
- **Recommendation:** Foster a positive educational atmosphere through supportive staff-student interactions and transparent policy communication. Expand tutoring services, including peer tutoring, and revise class schedules to meet diverse needs.

11. Equity and Systemic Barriers

- **Insight:** Limited availability of degree programs and individualized course selection restrict fair access to education.
- **Recommendation:** Broaden the range of vocational and degree programs tailored to individual goals and develop support systems for students facing educational disruptions.

12. Institutional Policy Reform

- **Insight:** Disciplinary actions often disrupt educational opportunities.
- **Recommendation:** Encourage policy changes to prevent the removal of students from educational programs for disciplinary reasons. Promote counseling and mentorship to support educational continuation and success.

13. Enhanced Support for Long-term ABE Participants

- **Insight:** Some individuals spend extended durations (8-10 years) in ABE classes, indicating potential barriers to progression.
- **Recommendation:** Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the ABE programs to understand the reasons for prolonged durations and identify barriers to progression. Implement targeted improvements to facilitate timely advancement through ABE levels.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Synthesizing Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis of survey data and focus group discussions conducted by Unapologetically HERS reveals several significant insights into the educational aspirations and barriers faced by incarcerated individuals in California women's prisons. The findings highlight a diverse demographic with varied educational needs, a strong desire for higher education, and several systemic and logistical challenges that hinder educational access and success. These insights form the basis for the following recommendations to enhance access to higher education for incarcerated individuals.

The findings also align with established theories in adult education and rehabilitation, such as Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the transformative power of education through participatory action research (PAR). The approach recognizes education as a tool for empowerment and social change, particularly within correctional settings, where education can serve as a critical pathway for personal development and societal reintegration.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study suggests several practical implications for policymakers and prison administrators:

- **Educational Programming Schedules:** Policies should facilitate flexible scheduling to allow incarcerated individuals to participate in education without conflicting with other mandatory/self help activities.
- **Materials Accessibility:** Improvements must be made to the way educational materials and resources are provided so that everyone, regardless of language or educational experience, has access to the tools they need to study.
- **Educational Priorities:** Shifts in educational priorities to accommodate various learning needs, ensuring that programs are inclusive and accessible to all incarcerated individuals, regardless of their educational level or disabilities.

Reflective Insights

The participatory action research approach highlighted the importance of engaging incarcerated individuals as co-researchers, which not only provided valuable insights but also empowered the participants. Reflecting on the limitations, the study acknowledges the challenges in fully capturing the diversity of educational needs across different facilities. The lessons learned highlight the potential of this research model to be replicated and adapted in other contexts, promoting a more inclusive and effective educational framework within the correctional system.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

References

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- Taber, N., & Muralidharan, A, (2023) Second Chance Pell: Six Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016-2022.
- Gaskill, S., Gould, M.R., Price, V., Castro, E.L., Lerman, A.E. (2023). The landscape of higher education in prison, 2020-2021. Alliance for Higher Education in Prison. <http://higheredinprison.org>

These references provide foundational knowledge and research practices that underpin the white paper's discussions on improving access to higher education for incarcerated individuals.

AUTHORSHIP NOTE

The comprehensive research and composition of this report was collaboratively undertaken by a diverse team of community researchers. This document is the result of a participatory action research approach, led by the following dedicated individuals:

Community Research Team (08):

- Arlene Dugmore
- Malinda Jones
- Tamara Hinkle
- Kinzie Noordman
- Paige Linville
- Sally Hasper
- Laura Lutrell Purviance
- Jennifer Henderson

Each member of the community research team brought unique perspectives and insights, drawing on personal experiences and academic expertise to enrich the research process and findings.

UAHERS Team:

- Chyrl Lamar, Peer Mentor - Played a pivotal role in mentoring the community researchers, providing guidance and support throughout the research process.
- Precious Johnson, PARLP Coordinator/Thought Partner - Coordinated the research activities and served as a thought partner, ensuring that the research methodology was robust and inclusive.
- Aminah Elster, PARLP Facilitator/Researcher and UAHERS Executive Director - Facilitated the research process, contributed to data analysis, and ensured that the findings were aligned with UAHERS's mission of empowering incarcerated individuals through education.

This collaboration was instrumental in addressing the complex issues surrounding access to higher education in prisons. The teams' joint efforts have highlighted significant barriers and proposed actionable recommendations for policy and practice, aiming to transform educational opportunities within carceral settings and contribute to broader systems change.

About Unapologetically HERS

Unapologetically HERS, Healing Experiences through Research Solutions (UAHERS), is a transformative organization established in 2020 by formerly incarcerated women of color in response to the critical needs of their peers. Dedicated to prison abolition and criminal justice reform, UAHERS leverages research, evaluation, and experiential knowledge to uplift the voices and experiences of incarcerated individuals. Core to its mission, UAHERS promotes racial and gender equity, focusing its efforts on the decarceration of people within California's women's prisons.

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BIOGRAPHIES



Arleen Dugmore

Arleen Dugmore is a compassionate woman dedicated to serving individuals and her community. Incarcerated for 23 years on a Life Without Parole sentence, Arleen has spent her time engaging in numerous self-help groups aimed at self-discovery and empowerment. Through her roles in Compassionate Companions and Convicted Women Against Abuse, she embodies a compassionate survivor, advocating for educational equality and systemic change. Arleen's commitment extends to supporting her peers through severe illness, grief, and loss, and she facilitates workshops on Domestic Violence Awareness.



Sally Hasper

Sally Hasper has dedicated 37 years of her life within CIW to aiding and mentoring the mentally ill and developmentally disabled. Serving a life without parole sentence, Sally has become a pivotal educator, tutoring individuals with no reading skills and assisting those at the ABE I level. For over 14 years, she has supported her peers in overcoming various challenges, from socialization struggles to navigating complex prison systems. Sally offers crucial study materials, clerical, and organizational support to those preparing for parole board hearings. Her commitment extends to advocating for the unheard, believing that a helping hand strengthens and enhances the safety and success of her community. Sally continues to champion for equitable treatment and the provision of adequate resources for all who cannot advocate for themselves.

BIOGRAPHIES



Jennifer Henderson

Jennifer Henderson is a testament to personal transformation and resilience. Incarcerated at 23 and sentenced to life without parole, Jennifer has taken her journey of self-discovery seriously, earning two AA degrees and currently pursuing a BA in Liberal Studies through CSULA. A certified Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Counselor, she actively contributes to the well-being of others in her professional and volunteer roles. Jennifer's dedication to growth extends into her personal life, where she embraces hobbies like crocheting and hair styling, and cherishes the opportunity to positively influence her two children with the lessons learned from her past and present.



Tamara Hinkle

Tamara Hinkle is a transformative figure within her community, dedicated to pioneering change in the realm of incarcerated higher education. She tirelessly works to eliminate barriers in the educational journeys of incarcerated students, aiming to enhance their chances of success upon release, reduce recidivism, and support the ethos that education, not incarceration, is the solution. Tamara, who graduated Business College at 17 years old, has earned her Associate of Science Degree in General Business, and is scheduled to begin the second cohort of the Cal State LA Bachelor's in Liberal Arts Program at the California Institution for Women. Tamara has served 29 years of a life without parole sentence. A woman of many hats, mentor, facilitator, tutor, student and work in progress, Tamara remains focused on internal transformation while continuing to aim for the moon.



MaLinda "Mindy" Jones

MaLinda Jones, who prefers to be called Mindy, has spent nineteen of her sixty-nine years as a resident of CDCR. Her journey includes participating in countless self-help groups, with the Offender Mentor Certification Program (OMCP) at CCWF having the most significant impact on her personal growth. As a state-certified drug and alcohol counselor, Mindy has dedicated six years to working in the Substance Abuse Program (SAP), helping students find healing from substances and criminal behavior. Her work not only fosters her own growth but also makes a profound difference in reducing recidivism, improving public safety, and allowing her to live a life of amends.

BIOGRAPHIES



Paige Linville

Paige Linville is an unwavering advocate for social justice, with a focus on reforming the criminal justice system and dismantling the prison industrial complex. Currently serving a 25-year to life sentence, Paige is deeply committed to recognizing the impacts of her past actions on both direct and indirect victims while actively challenging violent and oppressive carceral policies. She applies transformative justice principles to foster healing and empowerment within herself and her community. Paige is involved in organizing fundraisers for charities and spearheads rehabilitative programs. As the Chairperson of the Incarcerated Persons Advisory Council, she advocates for humane, gender-responsive, and trauma-informed policies. (Paige's roles as a mentor, tutor, author, and public speaker are complemented by her academic pursuit in a Bachelor of Arts program at California State University, Los Angeles. She also contributes to training service dogs for the disabled and supports various community-based organizations. Through her work with Unapologetically HERS, Paige has honed her skills in empowering her community to advocate for research-driven policy changes. She plans to continue her advocacy efforts, leveraging her experiences and the tools gained from the Participatory Action Research Leadership Program.



Kinzie Noordman

Kinzie Noordman is deeply engaged in advocacy and restorative justice, with over 20 years navigating the carceral system. A published author and certified paralegal, Kinzie recently achieved a bachelor's degree, furthering her capacity to effect change. At CCWF and CIW, she actively promoted restorative justice programs, bringing a thoughtful and transformative approach to her advocacy. In her leisure time, Kinzie enjoys training service dogs, delving into the worlds of Star Trek, and engaging with her family. Her diverse interests range from octopuses and science fiction to crocheting and computer coding, reflecting her multifaceted personality and passions.



Laura Lutrell Purviance

Laura Lutrell Purviance is a multifaceted artist, writer, advocate, educator, and collaborator deeply involved in various political and multimedia projects. After earning her Associate degree with honors in sociology from the Central California Women's Facility, Laura transferred to Cal State L.A.'s Bachelor's in Liberal Studies program at the California Institute for Women. Her

BIOGRAPHIES

activism extends beyond the classroom through projects that connect her with the world beyond the razor wire. Laura combats her 50-Life sentence's constraints by engaging in cognitive behavioral therapy, Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and maintaining her mental health with generic Prozac. She's a fervent advocate for sustainable urban agriculture, recently winning second place in a pitch competition with a business idea that combines landscaping services with community-supported agriculture.



Precious Johnson

Precious Johnson serves as the PARLP Coordinator and Peer Mentor, where she supports and guides community researchers with unwavering dedication. A respected mentor, seasoned leader, and passionate advocate for prison reform, Precious has accumulated 15 years of direct experience within the prison system, offering invaluable knowledge and firsthand insights. During her incarceration, she earned an Associate degree in Business Management and played a pivotal role in a youth diversion program, steering young people towards constructive futures. Precious also facilitated self-help classes, earning recognition as a profound mentor within the prison community. Since her release, Precious has continued to champion transformative changes in the system, leveraging her personal journey and professional expertise to advocate for comprehensive reform and support for incarcerated individuals.



Aminah Elster

Aminah is a legal and policy advocate, researcher, and facilitator committed to systemic change in the criminal legal sphere. As a Black feminist, prison abolitionist, and formerly incarcerated professional, she co-founded Unapologetically HERS (UAHERS) to meet the critical needs of people incarcerated in CA women's prisons. UAHERS empowers through educational opportunities and advocacy, amplifying their voices through both research and experiential knowledge.