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Study urges lifting ban on Pell Grants for prisoners

Says education provides benefits for inmates after their release

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When Jose Bou was serving a 12-year sentence for trafficking cocaine at MCI-Norfolk, few things gave him hope.

Bou, now 43, had been caught up in the criminal justice system since his first arrest at 16. Stints in and out of prison seemed inevitable, he told reporters during a recent teleconference about the federal ban on Pell Grants for prisoners.

A joint study by the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality and the Vera Institute of Justice released last week showed the possible economic benefits of lifting the ban on Pell Grants for the incarcerated. The study was

funded by the Vera Institute of Justice.

Researchers held up Bou as an example of the positive influence education can have on prisoners.

“As I was getting educated something happened,” he said. “I wanted to be part of something bigger. By the time I started my second semester I was done doing time.”

Bou’s classes, attended by 12 men in the prison, showed him a way toward reinvention, and the possibility that he could return to the community he hurt as a positive force, he said.

When Bou was released in 2011 he had earned a degree in English from Boston University and returned to his hometown of Holyoke to teach criminal justice at Holyoke Community College. Now he works as the equity, family, and community partnerships manager for Holyoke Public Schools.

Bou is something of a phenomena for researchers who are pushing to end a federal ban on the use



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of Pell Grants, the leading source of financial aid for low-income students, for people in prison.

In Massachusetts 1,522 people, or roughly 16 percent of the state prison population, would be eligible for Pell Grants, if not for the ban, the research shows.

Massachusetts is taking steps to educate its inmates, and to promote more success stories like Bou. A \$250,000 grant, from the Vera Institute of Justice and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in September, is funding this effort. The money established a consortium that will support access to postsecondary education for prisoners statewide.

During the “tough on crime”

era in the mid-1990s, lawmakers banned the use of Pell Grants for the incarcerated, making public funding for people pursuing an education in prison nearly impossible, according to the study released last week.

“That public policy mistake continues to leave hundreds of thousands of people released from prison annually without a postsecondary degree or certificate at a profound disadvantage,” researchers wrote in the report.

Most people in prison, 64 percent nationally, have earned a high school diploma or GED and are eligible for post-secondary education, the report finds. But the latest data from 2014 shows

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just 9 percent of incarcerated people receive a certificate from a college or trade school while in prison.

"People who emerge ill-prepared to compete for a job often get stuck in a cycle of poverty and reinvolvement in the criminal justice system. The corrosive effects are more than individual: They extend into the larger economy, reducing the size of local skilled labor pools and swelling fiscal burdens for states' correctional, public safety, and social welfare systems," according to the report.

Researchers present the study as a way to "disrupt" mass incarceration and lower recidivism rates across the United States.

Researchers say they are intentionally releasing the data on the heels of a the passage of the First Step Act in December.

This law, according to CNN, turns federal prisons toward rehabilitation, tackles some harsh sentencing policies, and gives new protection to women and children in the federal prison system.

The United States criminal justice system is "not working," and is "rooted in a long history of racism," Nick Turner, the president of the Vera Institute of Justice, said. But the First Step Act makes positive strides. Bipartisan

effort on this topic, Turner said, seems possible.

Arthur Rizer, the justice and civil liberties policy director at the R Street Institute, called the idea "transformative."

"Education is transformative. We know that's true that's why we send our kids to college," he said. "(Educating inmates) gives a glimpse of a world of opportunity. Many people incarcerated have no hope."

Rizer said the ability to access Pell Grants and fund their education is a way to inmates an "ounce of hope."

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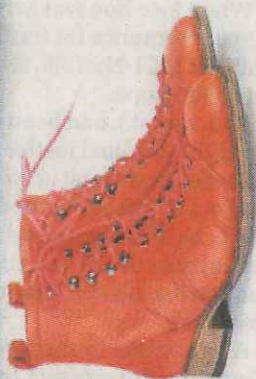
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