



ILLINOIS COALITION
FOR HIGHER ED IN PRISON

IDOC SURVEY BRIEF

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Supported By



Historical Background

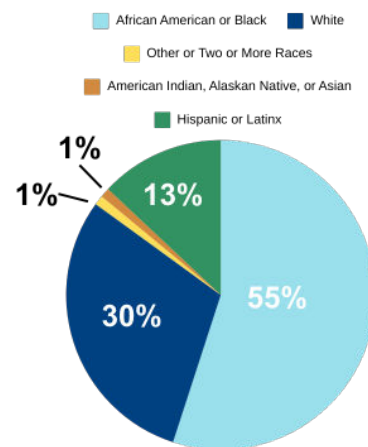
Historically, Illinois has stood at the forefront of prison reform. In 1952 Illinois became the first state to offer face-to-face higher education in prison (HEP) to incarcerated scholars, and by 1992 all its prisons offered some form of HEP programming. Unfortunately, after the 1994 Crime Bill removed incarcerated scholars from Pell Grant eligibility, HEP programming in Illinois dwindled to a small number of vocational programs. Recognition of the lack of humanity in the corrections system and the benefits of HEP has grown, and 8 new HEP programs have been established in Illinois in the last 7 years. However, 20 facilities remain without non-vocational HEP programs. Incarcerated scholars regained Pell Grant eligibility in 2020, which provides higher-education institutions with the opportunity to more easily partner with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to expand HEP programming. By stepping up to take advantage of Pell Grant restoration, colleges and universities can increase racial and economic equity, give a voice to a unique population that has often been denied access to higher education, and help reestablish Illinois as a leader in prison reform.

Many incarcerated people also face educational challenges long before they think about trying to enter HEP programs. In 2018, the IDOC found that only 30.7% of the Illinois prison population had received either a high school diploma or GED (Imeokparia, 3). This means that the majority of people who enter the prison system in Illinois are ineligible for HEP. While IDOC must also do their part to create space for HEP programs, these programs cannot be effective without also increasing access to GED and precollege coursework.

Survey Summary

In 2022, IL-CHEP conducted a survey about educational access in five correctional facilities (Logan, Lawrence, Stateville, Danville, and Sheridan). Each of these facilities had education programs in place, and all the survey respondents were participants in an educational program. Respondents were asked about their overall experience in educational programs, whether they had experienced difficulty accessing educational programs while in prison, and how their sentence length impacted their access to programs.

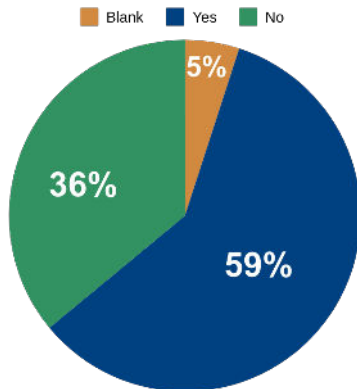
Demographics of Surveyed Facilities



The graphic above displays the demographics of the incarcerated populations in the 5 correctional facilities where the survey was administered and is not a representation of the survey participants themselves. In comparison, the overall population of Illinois is 58.3% white alone and 13.9% Black alone. (Burnett 2021). Additionally, as of 2021, "Latinx youth are 16% more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers, a sharp improvement over the decade." (Rovner, 2023)

Survey Response Data

Percentage of Participants Who Experienced Difficulty Accessing Programs



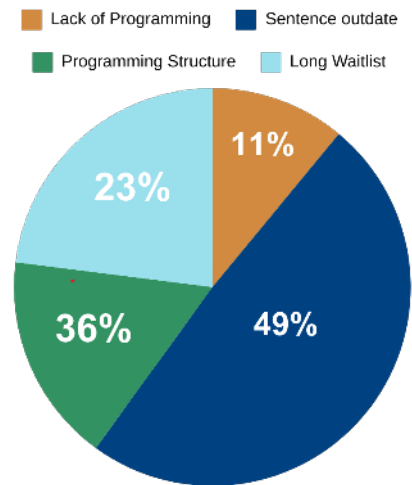
58.9% of survey participants said that accessing educational programs was difficult. This is especially noteworthy because the survey was only taken in facilities that do have programs.

“Because I scored low risk to offend, I was denied many of the programs that are offered to high-risk individuals. With such being the case I am denied the opportunity to present proof and attempt of rehabilitation and that I actively participated in that goal.” - Survey participant from Lawrence Correctional Center

49% of survey participants who experienced difficulty accessing HEP said this was due to their sentence out date. IDOC policy stipulates that once a GED or CTE (Community college) class is full, applicants are placed on the waiting list “organized by release date with those having shorter sentences being assigned first...Post-Secondary academic students are...accepted, wait listed, or denied entry into their programs regardless of release date.” For GED or CTE programs, if the rules changed so that sentence length did not impact selection, the same number of people would be left without access, even though people with longer sentences would be selected more often. Thus, the high proportion of participants who experienced difficult accessing HEP due to sentence length illustrates the need to increase the number of overall available spots by adding more programming.

“I’ve been incarcerated one quarter of a century (25) and have not been afforded access to GED classes due to the length of my sentence per IDOC policy. Only because I’m one of the very first to arrive at Lawrence step-down program have I now after all these years been able to gain access to GED classes.” -Survey participant from Lawrence Correctional Center

Reason for Difficulty Accessing HEP



Survey Testimonials

“It has opened and inspired new ways of thinking in me it has added to my worth and made me feel as if I’m working toward building a better me.”

-Survey participant from Logan Correctional Center

“If IDOC really wants to rehabilitate and prevent recidivism, everyone no matter the amount of time they have should be able to attend educational classes and programs.”

- Survey participant from Danville Correctional Center

Policy Recommendations

Restructure eligibility criteria for HEP so that incarcerated scholars with lengthy sentences can access programming within a reasonable time frame.

Currently, incarcerated scholars with lengthy sentences may have to wait many years, or even decades, before they can take GED or CTE courses necessary for enrolling in post-secondary education programs. As of December 31, 2020, 46.48% of people incarcerated in Illinois prisons had received sentences of 10 years or less, which means there is a steady turnover of people with relatively shorter sentences (John Howard Association, 2020). Under current IDOC policy, as people with shorter sentences cycle in and out of prison, they will continue to bump people with longer sentences down the wait list queue and prevent them from accessing programming in a humane amount of time. While we understand that no matter how the wait list is arranged, people will be left without access, we recommend that IDOC adjust their policy so that people who have been on a wait list for over 5 years also receive priority, regardless of sentence length. This would help create a more equitable system for incarcerated scholars to access their right to education and ensure that people who desire education can participate while they still have enough mental and physical capacity to do so.

Bolster the presence of community colleges in prisons to make sure that the programs leading to higher education are robust enough to complement the push for HEP expansion.

While many 4-year colleges and universities in Illinois have expressed interest in HEP or implemented programs, the comparative lack of community college presence in prisons is noticeable. Without program infrastructure that helps incarcerated scholars gain valuable skills and meet eligibility requirements for HEP programs, the impact of expanding HEP will be diminished.

Expand accessibility to GED and TABE programs in prisons.

The survey shows that even in prisons with programs, incarcerated scholars struggle to access programs due to requirements related to lower-level education (GED and TABE test prerequisites). This prevents incarcerated scholars who are interested and can thrive in HEP programming from realizing their academic and developmental potential.

Include HEP programming in the DEI plans of higher education institutions.

Without affirmative action, it is vital to reaffirm that institutions of higher education still serve an equitable body of students, and incarcerated scholars must be included in those efforts. Moreover, as seen in the demographics of the surveyed prisons, the majority people who have access to HEP programs come from communities that are already underrepresented in higher education.

Ensure HEP expansion also supports gender equity in education.

From 1975 to 2000, the Illinois women's prison population increased by 776% (WJI). Although admissions rates have declined slightly in recent years, an increase in punitive sentencing policies for women has led to longer sentences and "kept the women's prison population high, even as admissions have declined." (WJI) Currently, there are three HEP programs in Illinois that serve women. It is vital that women's prisons are included in HEP expansion efforts to ensure that education is protected as a right for all.

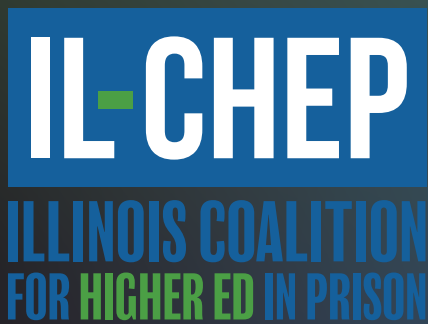
Acknowledgments

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Future Research

Future research should continue to explore the barriers that make accessing educational programs in Illinois correction facilities challenging. One of the potential opportunities for future directions involves expanding the scope of perspectives that are analyzed. As previously mentioned, there has been a notable increase in women's incarceration rates. Surveying individuals at women's correctional facilities allows for the examination of unique racial, gender, and systematic barriers that can pose additional challenges to accessing educational programs for this population.

Additionally, integrating the perspectives of correctional and educational faculty members can highlight additional challenges and new opportunities for collaborative solutions.



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