

MONIQUE O. OSITELU, PH.D.

# How Would a 5-Year Restriction on Pell Eligibility Impact Incarcerated Adults if the Pell Ban is Lifted?

**About the Author**

Monique O. Ositelu, PhD, is a senior policy analyst for higher education at New America. She previously served as a legislative analyst for education policy with the Florida Legislature's Research Unit, the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability.

**Acknowledgments**

New America would like to thank Lumina Foundation as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its generous support of our work. The views expressed in this report are those of its author and do not necessarily represent the views of the foundations, their officers, or their employees.

The author would also like to thank the correctional facilities that welcomed her for observation, formerly and currently incarcerated students, instructors, federal and state correctional administrators, and program facilitators who committed their time and shared their insights.

**About New America**

We are dedicated to renewing America by continuing the quest to realize our nation's highest ideals, honestly confronting the challenges caused by rapid technological and social change, and seizing the opportunities those changes create.

**About Education Policy**

We use original research and policy analysis to help solve the nation's critical education problems, crafting objective analyses and suggesting new ideas for policymakers, educators, and the public at large.

**About Higher Education**

New America's higher education program works to make higher education more accessible, innovative, student-centered, outcomes-focused, and equitable.

MONIQUE O. OSITELU, PH.D.

# How Would a 5-Year Restriction on Pell Eligibility Impact Incarcerated Adults if the Pell Ban is Lifted?

The Pell Grant program, federal grant aid for low-income college students, did not initially exclude incarcerated adults. The crime bill of 1994 disqualified adults in prisons from receiving Pell. However, in 2016, the Obama administration launched the Second Chance Pell pilot by selecting 69 U.S. colleges and universities to provide a college education to incarcerated adults through the use of the Pell Grant. Currently, a stipulation of Pell Grant eligibility for the Second Chance Pell experiment is that students must be eligible for parole, with priority given to students who will be released within 5 years of enrollment in the program. With the option of priority given to individuals with anticipated release dates within 5 years, exclusion is inevitable. If Congress reinstates Pell for incarcerated adults, but a 5-year restriction on eligibility were enforced, access to higher education could be denied to a substantial population of incarcerated adults.

*“I have a fear that if Pell is made permanent, they will try to implement limits. That is not good. Regardless of the crime committed or the time you have, you should be able to take college classes.”*

*—currently incarcerated student, June 2019*

## Figure 1 | The Majority of Adults in Prison Will Be Released Within 5 Years

Percentage of adults in prison who will be released based on a five year threshold



Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

NEW AMERICA

An overwhelming majority of adults in U.S. federal and state prisons will be released from prison within 5 years.

## Figure 2 | Regardless of Time Until Reentry, the Majority of Adults in Prison Are Individuals of Color

Percentage distribution of adults in prisons based on a 5-year threshold by race/ethnicity

Race	≤ 5 Years Until Release		> 5 Years Until Release (Including Never)	
	Percentage	Visual	Percentage	Visual
Individuals of Color	63%*		59%*	
White	37%		41%	

\* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the comparison category, white adults. New America analysis with Independent Samples t-Test.

Note: The percentages may not sum to totals because of rounding. The race category of Individuals of Color include Black (African American) and Hispanic (Latino) adults. To account for a smaller sample size when disaggregating the data and to maintain statistical authority in comparisons, the race/ethnicity categories of Black and Hispanic are combined as Individuals of Color for each subsequent analysis. The Other category for race/ethnicity is not included in the analysis.

Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

NEW AMERICA

Regardless of time until reentry (≤ 5 years until release and > 5 years until release), individuals of color are statistically significantly overrepresented in federal and state prisons compared with white adults.

The analysis shows a breakdown of demographics in U.S. federal and state prisons based on years until release. Of particular interest, both half of the adults (56 percent) who will be released within 5 years and half of the adults (53 percent) who will be released in more than 5 years are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary program (highest level of education is a high school equivalence) during incarceration.

**Policy Implications:** If Congress stipulates that Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals may be reinstated only for those within 5 years of release, two-thirds of academically qualified adults in U.S. federal and state prisons with more than 5 years remaining to their sentence would be ineligible to receive a Pell Grant.

**Table 1 | Demographics of Incarcerated Adults in Prison Across a 5-Year Threshold**

Across both subpopulations, more than half of the adults in prison are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary program.

	≤ 5 Years Until Release	> 5 Years Until Release (Including Never)
<b>Race</b>		
Individuals of Color	63%	59%
White	37%	41%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	8%	3%
Male	92%	97%
<b>Age in 10 Year Intervals</b>		
24 or less	14%	‡
25-34	37%	31%
35-44	23%	28%
45-54	18%	21%
55-65	7%	‡
66-74	‡	‡
<b>Highest Level of Education Obtained (current educational attainment)</b>		
No formal education	‡	‡
Less than High School Diploma/ GED	29%	32%
<b>High School Diploma/ GED</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>53%</b>
Certificate	9%	8%
Associate Degree	4%	5%
Bachelor's Degree	‡	‡
Graduate Degree (master's/doctorate/professional)	‡	‡
<b>Recidivism</b>		
Previously incarcerated	75%	67%
First time in prison	25%	33%

‡ Reporting standards not met.

Note: The percentages may not sum to totals because of rounding. The race category of Individuals of Color include Black (African American) and Hispanic (Latino) adults.

Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

## Table 2 | Demographics of Incarcerated Adults Who Are Academically Eligible to Enroll in a College Program but Would Be Unable to Access Pell Grants

Percentage distribution of incarcerated adults whose highest level of education is a high school equivalence across key characteristics

Academically Eligible with > 5 Years Until Release (Including Never)	
<b>Race</b>	
Individuals of Color	57%
White (no other)	43%
<b>Age in 10 Year Intervals</b>	
24 or less	‡
25-34	32%
35-44	31%
45-54	20%
55-65	‡
66-74	‡
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	3%
Male	97%

‡ Reporting standards not met.

Note: The percentages may not sum to totals because of rounding. The race category of Individuals of Color include Black (African American) and Hispanic (Latino) adults.

Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

**NEW AMERICA**

This table shows a breakdown across key demographics of incarcerated adults who are academically eligible (highest level of education is a high school equivalence) but would be denied access to Pell Grants if a 5-year restriction is enforced on Pell eligibility for individuals in prison.

### Figure 3 | Primarily Younger Men of Color Would Be Ineligible for Pell Grants if a 5-Year Restriction is Enforced

Percentage distribution of incarcerated adults who are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary program with > 5 years until release (including never)



Note: The Younger Adults category includes ages 44 or less. The race category of Individuals of Color include Black (African American) and Hispanic (Latino) adults.

Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

**NEW AMERICA**

**If the Pell ban were lifted for incarcerated adults but only for those eligible for release within 5 years, primarily younger, men, and individuals of color would be denied access to Pell Grants.**

**Policy Implications:** This would perpetuate inequities in access to higher education for individuals of color and further exacerbate the racial educational attainment gap. Furthermore, younger adults who are in the prime working-age population, who would benefit from earning a degree for career entry and professional advancement upon release, would be denied access to federal financial aid. While formerly incarcerated Black men are the least likely formerly incarcerated demographic to obtain employment upon release, further denying them access to financial aid to earn a postsecondary credential would exacerbate social and economic inequities within our nation.

*Given the racial disparities in both imprisonment and sentencing within our nation, a 5-year restriction on Pell eligibility would disproportionately harm people of color, denying them access to continued education.*

## Figure 4 | There is No Difference in Postsecondary Enrollment and Completion Rates, nor Interest in Higher Education, for Incarcerated Adults with Longer Sentences

	Postsecondary Enrollment Rate	Postsecondary Completion Rate	Interest in Postsecondary Programs
≤ 5 Years Until Release	22%	10%	68%
> 5 Years Until Release (Including Never)	20%	10%	69%

Note: Postsecondary refers to enrollment, completion, and interest in programs that render a certificate or formal degree (e.g. associates, bachelor's, master's, etc.). The sample size for incarcerated adults with more than five years to release who completed a postsecondary credential is small. For that reason, take caution with comparisons.

Source: New America Analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014 (public use file).

**NEW AMERICA**

Regardless of time to reentry, individuals enroll and complete postsecondary education programs at similar rates. Furthermore, both within and outside of a 5-year threshold to reentry, incarcerated adults are comparably interested in enrolling in a postsecondary program.

**Policy Implications:** The results of this analysis do not support legislative action that would limit Pell eligibility to individuals closer to release. The findings reveal that regardless of time to reentry, incarcerated adults are interested in, enroll in, and complete higher education at comparable rates.

*“When you begin to exclude based on additional criteria, it creates conflict and resentment and you miss an opportunity to transform the culture of the prison. Prisons already are a culture of conflict, so why add more with a program that has the potential to have many great benefits.”*

*-college-in-prison facilitator, May 2019*

## Contact

Monique O. Ositelu Ph.D., Senior Policy Analyst

[ositelu@newamerica.org](mailto:ositelu@newamerica.org)



## Methods

### Data

The analyses enclosed evaluated the 2014 U.S. PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) Prison Survey. The data is a nationally representative sample on the prison population to examine the skills of incarcerated adults in relationship to educational attainment while in prison. The 2014 U.S. PIAAC Prison Survey includes background variables about various prison activities (e.g. postsecondary education enrollment, completion, and interest). The sample consists of 1,319 incarcerated adults in U.S. federal and state prisons ages 18 to 74. Due to the rigorous survey methods conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the results are representative of the U.S. population and can be generalized to adults in federal and state prisons.

### Analysis

To evaluate the demographics of adults in prison who would be impacted by a 5-year stipulation and to evaluate the validity of a 5-year threshold on incarcerated adults' enrollment, completion, and interest patterns in higher education, we used a combination of descriptive estimates, t-Tests, and correlations. The analyses of academically eligible adults assumes interest in enrolling, capacity within correctional facilities, and compliance with other Pell eligibility requirements. The results of the PIAAC Prison Survey were collected in 2014, prior to the Second Chance Pell experiment – which may have influenced enrollment, completion, and interest patterns within prisons.

### Prison Site Visits

To address the limitations of survey data and to include the voices of those directly impacted, we observed, interviewed, and led focus groups at selected federal and state prisons. We collected qualitative data from over 200 individuals, including formerly and currently incarcerated students, federal and state correctional administrators, college programming staff, instructors, college presidents, and family members of currently incarcerated students. Selected quotes from the prison site visits are enclosed.