

How Prison Literacy Programs Can Fix America's Mass Incarceration Problem

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Image via The Petey Greene Program Facebook page

There are times when being ranked number one in the world is no cause for celebration—and that's the unfortunate case for the United States' **staggering incarceration rate**, which is five to ten times higher than incarceration rates in other democratic nations. With only 5 percent of the global population, the United States houses nearly a quarter of the world's prisoners: an estimated 2.2 million people living behind bars.

Education and literacy—along with poverty, race, and gender—have a big impact on the likelihood that a person will spend time in prison. A study from **Northeastern University** found that **young men who dropped out of high school were 47 times more likely to be jailed than college graduates**. And a National Research Council **report** found a clear link between level of education and imprisonment, especially for black and Hispanic men. For example, the **report** estimates that in 2010, **one in three young black men who had dropped out of high school was incarcerated**.

Experts call this the **school-to-prison pipeline**, and it's clear that it can impact whole families. After all, parents who are sent to prison lose

more than their freedom—they lose the ability to nurture and support their children on a day-to-day basis. In turn, kids with incarcerated parents often **struggle with their grades** and are more likely to be **suspended or expelled** from school. They're also more likely to be incarcerated themselves one day.

To help break this cycle, nonprofit groups across the country are offering literacy programs in prisons to encourage parents to bond with their children through reading. The concept is simple: Parents choose a donated children's book to read while a volunteer makes a digital recording. Then the recording and book are mailed to the child. Since the program is fairly inexpensive to run, inmates can usually participate multiple times.

“The kids end up with a library after a while,” explains Carol Potok, executive director of **Aid to Inmate Mothers (AIM)**. The nonprofit's **Storybook Program**, launched in 2000 at Julia Tutwiler Prison and Montgomery Women's Facility in Alabama, was among the first of its kind. Last year, they sent recordings and books to more than 1,400 children of inmates, including many who lived too far away to visit their moms in person.

“It's a wonderful way to encourage the moms to read. It encourages them to learn how to love storytelling,” says Potok. “And for the children, it's from their mom, so they're going to read the book, too. Some of them really memorize it, they read it so much.”

However, the program still has stumbling blocks, Potok says. “We’ve had a few come to the program, and pull [a volunteer] aside and say, ‘I can’t read. Can you read this for me?’” She worries that some inmates who are illiterate may simply avoid the program out of embarrassment.

Potok’s concerns are well founded. The last [national assessment](#) of literacy in prisons, conducted in 2003, revealed that 56 percent of inmates had only basic or below-basic literacy skills.

Shaina Watrous is one of many people trying to improve those skills. She’s the D.C. field manager for the [Petey Greene Program](#), a nonprofit organization that trains college students to tutor prisoners in five states and Washington, D.C.

“The first time I went to a prison to tutor, I was working with someone who was 35 years old and English was his first language,” Watrous recalls. “I was working with him on flashcards with four- or five-letter words, where he was struggling to read everything. I just remember thinking about all the systems that had to have failed this man for him to get to that point. We talk about giving prisoners a second chance—but so many people in prison have never had a first chance.”

There’s broad [political consensus](#) that mass incarceration is a major problem—and that education programs in prisons should be part of the solution. Researchers from the nonprofit, nonpartisan [Rand Corporation](#) found that inmates who took part in education programs

had 43 percent lower odds of re-offending when they got out of prison. That's a big deal because, on average, **about half** of all inmates re-offend and are re-incarcerated within three years of their release. But in the last two decades, funding for prison education programs has fluctuated. Most states still offer adult basic education, GED courses, and vocational training in at least some of their prisons, and many offer college courses, too. However, the 2008 recession led to **cutbacks**—translating into fewer classes, fewer inmates enrolled, and less staff support.

“It would be hard to imagine a political situation in which there is enough education programming for people in prison,” says Watrous. “At every level, there is a need. For adult basic literacy, there is a need. At the high school level, there is a need. And for higher education, there will always be a need for more.”

With time served at six correctional facilities, Brian Snyder saw firsthand how much educational programming can vary between prisons. One prison offered no programming whatsoever, while other facilities had classes with waiting lists that were years long. Snyder spent nearly 10 years incarcerated for three offenses—distributing drugs, armed robbery, and aggravated assault—all of which occurred when he was 17.

Unlike many of his fellow inmates, Snyder entered the system with a high school diploma. (He estimates that he met at least 15 men who

couldn't read or write, and many more who hadn't finished high school). He started taking college courses through the Petey Greene Program, and was eventually recruited into Rutgers University's [Mountainview Program](#), an initiative that supports high-achieving students from prison education classes.

“For them to tell me I could possibly go to Rutgers, it was like a joke,” he recalls. “I grew up near the New Brunswick campus [in New Jersey]. We would come through the area and it was like a whole different world for me. It was a world I didn't think I would ever belong to. It was like, ‘Oh, those are just people that go to Rutgers. They're, like, special.’”

But a few months after his release from prison in 2012—and an in-depth application and interview process—Snyder was accepted. The 31-year-old will graduate in 2016 with a degree in communication. He says that taking classes in prison was life-changing for him. “It gave me a lot of hope and promise for what I'm able to accomplish from here on out,” he adds.

Snyder's is just one success story. But if stronger education programs were implemented in all U.S. prisons, there could be countless more. If you'd like to help ensure that happens, support the work nonprofit organizations do to offer educational programs in prisons by donating books or time.

Storybook and read-to-me programs are always accepting donations for new and gently used children's books, and some also need volunteers to help record stories. Or consider donating books to one of the many prison book programs across the country, which respond to inmates' requests for reading material. If you're a college student, you can also check to see if your school offers a training program, such as the Petey Greene Program, to help you become a tutor at a prison in your area. And if you have interest in supporting youth before they end up in the school-to-prison pipeline, contact a program like Pearson's iLit, a research-proven instructional model designed to help struggling readers—whether they're traditional students, or on their way to juvenile detention centers—gain two or more years of literacy skills in a single year.

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