

The New York Times

# Gov. Cuomo's Bold Step on Prison Education

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#)

FEB. 18, 2014

One of the biggest obstacles to reducing America's enormous prison population is the stubbornly high rates of recidivism. Nationwide, [as many as half](#) of those released end up back in prison within three years.

There are many reasons for this, and not many simple answers, but one solution has long proved to be both reliable and cost-effective: education behind bars.

People who go to prison are already among the least educated members of society. While about 20 percent of the general public doesn't have a high school diploma, that number rises to nearly 40 percent among prisoners.

Yet the same political and social forces that have driven the country's prison boom over four decades have also worked to eliminate most government support for inmate education, including Congress's irrational and counterproductive [decision in 1994](#) to deny federal Pell grants to people in prison. In the aftermath, the number of college degree programs for prisoners around the country [dropped from 350 to about a dozen](#).

On Sunday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York took a bold step to restore some common sense to this contorted debate, [announcing new financing](#) for college classes in 10 state prisons. The initiative will offer inmates the opportunity to earn either an associate's or a bachelor's degree over the course of two to three years.

Mr. Cuomo was quick to point out that the cost — \$5,000 per inmate per year — is a fraction of the \$60,000 New York spends annually to house a prisoner. But even more compelling is the weight of decades of data: According to a [RAND study released last summer](#) reviewing 30 years of research, inmates who participated in educational programs had a substantially reduced risk of reoffending within three years than those who did not.

That's partly because of higher rates of post-release employment for those who got an education while in prison. A job means more stability and more money — which translates into less crime, fewer inmates, and more savings for taxpayers. Every dollar spent on inmate education, the study calculated, meant \$4 to \$5 not spent on reincarceration down the road.

For the past two decades, prisoner education money has been scrounged up by private groups working to fill in the gaps left by the government. The Vera Institute of Justice recently received financing for [a five-year project](#) to educate prisoners in Michigan, New Jersey and North Carolina. And, in New York, the [Bard Prison Initiative](#), directed by Bard College, has enrolled more than 500 students since 2001 and handed out more than 250 college degrees. While the state struggles with an overall recidivism rate of 40 percent, only 4 percent of prisoners enrolled in the Bard program and 2.5 percent of those who completed a degree returned to prison.

Results like these would seem hard to dispute, but several Republican [legislators](#) are opposing Mr. Cuomo's plan, calling it a "[slap in the face](#)" to law-abiding New Yorkers.

This argument makes no more sense than it did in 1994, when less than 1 percent of all Pell grants went to prisoners. In both cases, education isn't an either-or proposition. More than 700,000 inmates walk out of state and federal prisons across the country every year, and it is in everyone's interest to make sure they stay out.