

Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis

In 2023, Pell Grants will become widely available to eligible incarcerated people for the first time since they were banned in 1994.¹ The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, launched in 2015, has already impacted the landscape of prison higher education by increasing the number of colleges and universities providing in-prison postsecondary education. For example, a quarter of the initial 67 Programs selected to participate did not offer courses to incarcerated students before Second Chance Pell. Further, since 2016, over 200 higher education institutions have participated in the Experiment, enrolling over 28,000 students. Collectively, incarcerated students have earned over 28,000 credentials since the start of the Experiment.²

Specific information regarding student-level enrollment, persistence, and completion in the Experiment is lacking.³ Our research team obtained de-identified student-level data from four higher education institutions to learn about who Second Chance Pell students are and how they fare regarding persistence and completion. We worked with institutional research offices at each institution to collect information on student enrollment, persistence, and completion; financial aid; and demographics. In addition, this research brief draws on focus groups conducted with incarcerated students and formerly incarcerated alumni of prison higher education programs.

This research brief draws upon three years of data collection through a national mixed-methods project, *Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell*.⁴ Here, we include data collected from the staff at four higher education institutions in financial aid, admissions, and registrar or related unit. The larger study focused on nine institutions participating in the Second Chance Pell Experiment. This brief focuses on a subset of four institutions that had the capacity to provide our research team with de-identified student data in a timely manner. In this research brief, we address the following questions using data drawn from four institutions participating in the Experiment:

1. How many incarcerated students were awarded the Pell Grant between 2017 and 2021, and what percentage of total incarcerated enrollment in the program did they represent?
2. What type and how many credentials did incarcerated Pell recipients earn between 2017 to 2021?
3. Who were Second Chance Pell recipients by race, sex, and age?
4. How many incarcerated Pell recipients in the first cohort ultimately earned a credential?

Table 1 provides descriptive information regarding the sites included in this analysis (four out of nine) by institution type and instructional mode used by the program.

Table 1

DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION FOR FOUR SITES

Site	Institutional Type	Instruction Mode
A	2-year, Public	Distance-based
B	4-year, Public	In-person
C	2-year, Public	Distance-based
E	4-year, Private not-for-profit	In-person

HOW MANY INCARCERATED STUDENTS WERE AWARDED PELL GRANTS BETWEEN 2017 AND 2021?

Altogether, the four sites that provided student data in our study awarded the Pell Grant to 953 students between the academic years of 2017 to 2021; this number represents 85% of total enrolled students. We defined a Pell recipient as an individual who received the Pell Grant for at least one term from fall 2017 to summer 2021 as an incarcerated student. This means that someone could have been a Pell recipient for the entirety of their enrollment or that they received Pell during a particular term. The specific time frame, Fall 2017 to Summer 2021, was selected because all sites had consistent data for these years while participating in the Experiment.

Table 2 provides a breakdown by site of the makeup of Pell recipients compared to overall student enrollment. Within our sample of four institutions, 2-year schools had the largest share of Pell recipients; Site C (public, 2-year) had 88% and Site A (public, 2-year) had 99% whereas Site B (public, 4-year) and Site E (private, 4-year) had 52%, and 55% of their total enrolled students receiving the Pell Grant.

Table 3 provides information by institutional type of Pell recipients compared to enrollment. Almost all students enrolled at 2-year institutions (94%) used Pell funds to finance their postsecondary education. Pell recipients at 4-year institutions comprised just over half (54%) of all enrolled students.

Table 2

PERCENTAGE OF ENROLLED UNDUPLICATED STUDENTS WHO WERE PELL RECIPIENTS FROM 2017-2021 BY SITE

	A	B	C	E	Overall
Enrollment	470	42	394	217	1123
Percentage of Pell Recipients	99%	52%	88%	55%	85%

Table 3

PERCENTAGE OF ENROLLED UNDUPLICATED STUDENTS WHO WERE PELL RECIPIENTS FROM 2017-2021 BY INSTITUTIONAL-TYPE

	2-year Institutions	4-year Institutions	Overall
Enrollment	864	259	1123
Percentage of Pell Recipients	94%	54%	85%

WHAT TYPE AND HOW MANY CREDENTIALS DID INCARCERATED PELL RECIPIENTS EARN BETWEEN 2017 TO 2021?

While this brief focused primarily on data from Fall 2017 to Fall 2021, we wanted to report the most recent credential information among participating sites in our sample. Time-to-credential is the time it takes a student to earn a credential from initial enrollment in a postsecondary institution, regardless of whether the student was consistently enrolled. Table 4 thus reflects completed degrees and certificates between Fall 2017 to Fall 2021. During this period, 146 Pell recipients enrolled at these four institutions earned 176 credentials. Career and technical certificates, such as technical diplomas or vocational awards, were the majority (51%) of all credentials earned using Pell monies. Table 4 only reports degrees and certificates earned by the respective program. It is possible that students would have earned or had other credentials prior to their time with the specific program and thus would not be captured in this table. Students received degrees such as Associate of Arts, Science, or General Studies degrees, which comprised more than one-third (37%) of awards earned, and ten percent were Bachelor's degrees. Finally, Pell recipients also earned Associate of Applied Science or Professional Studies degrees, which made up 2% of all credentials.

“ DURING THIS PERIOD, 146 PELL RECIPIENTS ENROLLED AT THESE FOUR INSTITUTIONS EARNED 176 CREDENTIALS.”

Table 4

CREDENTIALS EARNED USING PELL FUNDS

	2018 (N=25)	2019 (N=37)	2020 (N=44)	2021 (N=70)	Overall (N=176)
Vocational Certificates	84%	73%	59%	21%	51%
Associate of Applied Science, Associate of Professional Studies	0%	3%	0%	4%	2%

	2018 (N=25)	2019 (N=37)	2020 (N=44)	2021 (N=70)	Overall (N=176)
Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of General Studies	8%	16%	34%	60%	37%
Bachelor's Degree	8%	8%	7%	14%	10%

**One credential was neglected from this table because of a lack of information. In this instance, it was not reported to our team what type of award was conferred (i.e., degree, certificate).*

WHO ARE SECOND CHANCE PELL RECIPIENTS BY RACE, SEX, AND AGE?

Among the 953 Pell Grant recipients across the four sites (see Table 5), the majority were male (89%). By institutional type, 4-year and 2-year institutions share the same ratio of female awardees in the aggregate (see Table 6). However, overall, female students represent just 11% of all students served in this sample. One institution's overall Pell recipients were 45% female, which comprised a large portion of the overall number of female aid recipients in this analysis (53 out of 105). The sex reported to our team was exclusively binary (i.e., male or female), with the exception of Site A reporting one individual as "other," a category our team did not suggest. Thus, we cannot share information for trans*, transgender, gender non-conforming, or gender-expansive students because the institutions in this sample either are not collecting this information or chose not to share it with our team.

Tables 7 and 8 provide racial information for Pell recipients. Among females and males, the largest racial group receiving Pell is White students, which is consistent with recent research.⁵ When accounting for institutional type, slightly more than half of Pell recipients at 2-year institutions are White. In comparison, aid recipients at 4-year schools serve about the same ratio of Black students as 2-year schools do White students. It is important to note that Site A was missing 71% of their race data for female awardees contributing to the portion of this group's general unknown race information (22%). Among the data provided for female Pell recipients, the second-largest racial category is Black students. For males, African Americans and Latinx students are the second and third largest racial groups. Several factors have the potential to influence student demographics. Four-year institutions admit smaller cohorts and have an admissions process where they can be more intentional and selective about the groups they admit. Both 4-year programs discussed pre-college courses in place to help students meet the requirements for undergraduate courses, thus creating a bridge-like entry into their programs. On the contrary, both 2-year institutions in this study have open-enrollment policies without further requirements beyond a high school diploma and eligible behavioral status in the prison; they can enroll if there is capacity. In these cases, applicants deemed eligible by the prison administration can theoretically participate.

Tables 9 and 10 provide the age groups of Pell Grant recipients during specific award years. The age distribution of Pell recipients is consistent with existing research; most of the Pell recipients at these four institutions are older than the dependent age of 24.⁶

Table 5

PELL RECIPIENTS BY SEX

	A (N=467)	B (N=22)	C (N=345)	E (N=119)	Overall
Male	95%	100%	92%	55%	89%
Female	5%	0%	8%	45%	11%

*One data point is not included in this table; only one institution included 'other' as a category for sex and listed one individual in this category.

Table 6

PELL RECIPIENTS BY SEX & INSTITUTIONAL TYPE

	Male (N=847)	Female (N=105)
2-year Institutions	90%	50%
4-year Institutions	10%	50%

Table 7

FEMALE PELL RECIPIENTS FROM 2017-2021: RACE

	A (N=24)	B (N=0)	C (N=28)	E (N=53)	Overall
American Indian	0%	0%	4%	2%	2%
Asian	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Black	8%	0%	7%	51%	30%
White	21%	0%	68%	30%	38%
Latinx	0%	0%	18%	6%	8%
Other	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%
Unknown	71%	0%	4%	9%	22%

Table 8

MALE PELL RECIPIENTS FROM 2017-2021: RACE

	A (N=442)	B (N=22)	C (N=317)	E (N=66)	Overall
American Indian	3%	5%	4%	0%	3%
Asian	0%	9%	1%	0%	1%
Black	19%	23%	27%	70%	26%
White	61%	32%	47%	15%	51%
Latinx	3%	23%	20%	5%	10%
Other	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Unknown	13%	9%	0%	8%	8%

Table 9

2-YEAR INSTITUTIONS: PELL RECIPIENTS BY AGE

	2017-2018 (N=202)	2018-2019 (N=292)	2019-2020 (N=351)	2020-2021 (N=355)
18-24	17%	7%	7%	7%
25-36	51%	58%	56%	57%
37-45	19%	20%	23%	22%
46-55	10%	13%	10%	11%
55-65	2%	2%	3%	3%
66 and over	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 10

4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS: PELL RECIPIENTS BY AGE

	2017-2018 (N=51)	2018-2019 (N=103)	2019-2020 (N=110)	2020-2021 (N=80)
18-24	2%	3%	0%	0%

	2017-2018 (N=51)	2018-2019 (N=103)	2019-2020 (N=110)	2020-2021 (N=80)
25-36	49%	36%	33%	30%
37-45	22%	39%	37%	36%
46-55	18%	17%	25%	28%
55-65	8%	5%	3%	4%
66 and over	0%	0%	1%	1%

**This table does not include a row for the percentage of missing values.*

HOW MANY INCARCERATED PELL RECIPIENTS IN THE FIRST COHORT ULTIMATELY EARNED A CREDENTIAL?

Prison-initiated restrictions greatly impact completion rates for incarcerated college students. These restrictions include student removal and disruption practices that cause attrition, such as disciplinary practices and scheduling, both of which were greatly impacted by COVID-19. Nonetheless, demonstrating how students fare beyond initial enrollment is critical to understanding time-to-credential, and the extent to which incarcerated Pell recipients persist and complete postsecondary education. Table 11 analyzes the first cohort in each program to determine how many students in this group ultimately earned a credential by Fall 2021. We calculated the first cohort size based on the number of students enrolled in the first academic year that the prison higher education program offered credit-bearing courses. Our research team calculated an adjusted completion rate by using the number of students who earned a credential divided by the number of total students in the initial cohort.

Columns C and A in Table 11 provide student completion information for 2-year institutions in our sample from the start of their program. Sites A and C confer associate degrees and vocational and career and technical certificates. Site C had an initial cohort size of 60 students, 16 of whom completed a credential by the fall term of 2021. At this site, sixteen students earned 19 degrees and no students earned certificates. Site A had an initial cohort size of 122 students, 16 of whom earned a credential. Of the 16 who earned a credential, nine students earned 10 degrees, and 10 earned 13 certificates. Accordingly, program C had an overall student completion rate of 27% and program A had an overall student completion rate of 13%.

Columns B and E in Table 11 provide student completion information for 4-year institutions in our sample from the start of their program. Sites B and E consisted of programs that only confer bachelor's degrees. Site B had eight students from the initial cohort of 20 who ultimately earned a degree. Facility E's first cohort of 55 students had three students total who earned a degree by the time our team completed this research study. Programs B and E had an estimated overall student completion rate of 40% and 5%, respectively.

Table 11

STUDENT COMPLETION INFORMATION BASED ON FIRST PROGRAM COHORT

	A	B	C	E
	Cohort 1, 2016-2017 AY	Cohort 1, 2015-2016 AY	Cohort 1, 2017-2018 AY	Cohort 1, 2012-2013 AY
Cohort Size	122	20	60	55
Number of Students Who Earned a Credential	16	N/A	16	N/A
Number of Students Who Completed Degrees	9	8	16	3
Number of Completed Degrees	10	8	19	3
Number of Students Who Completed Certificates	10	N/A	0	N/A
Number of Completed Certificates	13	N/A	0	N/A
Percentage of Students in First Cohort Who Completed a Degree	7%	40%	27%	5%
Percentage of Students in First Cohort Who Completed a Certificate	8%	N/A	0%	N/A
Percentage Overall of Students in First Cohort Who Completed a Credential	13%	N/A	27%	N/A

*Note: Institution B requires an associate degree for admission.

*Sites B and E confer only bachelor's degrees.

Summary and Implications

As Pell Grants become widely available to eligible incarcerated students, accurate and timely student-level data is critical to understanding how federal student aid recipients fare in prison higher education programs. This research demonstrates that the number of incarcerated Pell recipients participating in higher education is substantial, particularly white men enrolled in career and technical education certificate programs. Below we provide summary and implications for each of the research questions.



HOW MANY STUDENTS WERE AWARDED THE PELL GRANT AMONG FOUR SECOND CHANCE PELL INSTITUTIONS BETWEEN 2017 AND 2021, AND WHAT PERCENTAGE OF INCARCERATED ENROLLMENT DO THEY REPRESENT?

Among our sample of four institutions, a total of 953 incarcerated students were awarded Pell Grants in the academic years 2017 to 2021. The highest ratio of incarcerated Pell recipients was concentrated among 2-year institutions, comprising almost one-hundred percent (94%) of all enrolled incarcerated students in the program. Pell recipients at 4-year institutions accounted for just over half (54%) of all enrolled incarcerated students.

Pell plays a significant role for these students, programs, and institutions of higher education as recipients comprised 85% of all enrolled incarcerated students across the sites. Put slightly differently, this means that only 15% of incarcerated students enrolled in postsecondary education during these years were not drawing Pell funds. Additional research should examine the dynamics and circumstances of ineligible applicants and those who choose not to apply or are denied the opportunity to apply because of their ineligible status or other reasons.

Various factors influence the differences in percentage of Pell recipients in prison higher education programs by institutional type. First, the ability of 4-year private institutions to scholarship and/or draw additional monies to support students ineligible for Pell is greater than at the 2-year institutions in our sample. Our qualitative data indicate that some program practitioners and administrators at 2-year public institutions desire to assist applicants who are ineligible for Pell. However, these practitioners shared that they do not have the institutional resources or capacity to do so.



WHO WERE SECOND CHANCE PELL RECIPIENTS BY RACE, SEX, AND AGE?

Among the 953 Pell recipients recorded during the academic years of 2017 to 2021, the largest racial group across all sexes was whites. The overwhelming majority of awardees were identified by program staff as male at 89% with just 11% identified as female. When examining the age of students at the beginning of each academic year, the majority of students at both 2- and 4-year institutions were over the age of 24; the 2-year institutions' largest group was among 25-36 year-olds and 4-year institutions' largest age group was 25-36 and 37-45. These findings are consistent with recent research identifying incarcerated Pell recipients as primarily white, male, and of independent age under federal student aid guidelines. Additional research should inquire about the extent to which individuals who fall outside of these dominant groups are able to meaningfully participate in prison higher education.



HOW MANY STUDENTS IN THE FIRST COHORT ULTIMATELY EARNED A CREDENTIAL AND HOW LONG DID IT TAKE THEM TO COMPLETE IT?

Our research team also examined the first cohort in each prison higher education program to determine how many students ultimately earned a degree by Fall 2021 using Pell funds. As a reminder, we coded students as either receiving Pell at any point of enrollment during this time frame or not receiving Pell during the time frame. We estimated adjusted completion rates for students among sites that provided student data (four sites out of nine). The highest rate of student completion was among Site B

(4-year, public) where 40% of the Program's first cohort earned a bachelor's degree by Fall 2021. Site B's comparatively higher rate can perhaps be attributed to the admissions requirements for this program; students are admitted as transfer students and thus hold an associate degree at the time of enrollment. The second-highest completion rate was among Site A (2-year, public), where 27% of the first cohort earned a credential by the end of 2021. The second-lowest student completion rate was found for Site C (2-year, public); here, 13% of students in the first cohort earned a certificate or degree by the time these data were collected. Finally, the lowest completion rate was among a 4-year, private institution where 5% of the initial cohort (Site E) earned a bachelor's degree by 2021.

Completion and time-to-credential are significant metrics in estimating student success in higher education. For the field of prison higher education, such metrics may not - and likely do not - represent a holistic picture of student experience nor progress. Additionally, completion and time-to-degree are greatly influenced by demographics such as race/ethnicity, class, first-generation status, and related identities. Characteristically, incarcerated students embody multiple student groups, such as returning adults, transfer students, swirling students, and other salient student categories throughout postsecondary education. Credit accumulation and audits of transcripts are notoriously difficult to access during incarceration, further complicating accurate completion estimates. Nonetheless, it will be essential to have accurate data for completion and time-to-credential for incarcerated Pell recipients moving forward. Programs and colleges and universities should find ways to track student progress during incarceration and should be able to differentiate progress during and post-incarceration.



WHAT TYPE AND HOW MANY CREDENTIALS DID STUDENTS EARN UNDER SECOND CHANCE PELL BETWEEN 2017 TO 2021?

To report the most up-to-date data regarding credentials earned by incarcerated students receiving Pell, we expanded our timeframe for this particular inquiry by one semester. From fall 2017 to fall 2021, a total of 146 students across these four institutions earned 176 credentials. Slightly more than half of the credentials earned using Pell funds (51%) were certificates of completion in vocational and career and technical education pathways. Associate degrees comprised the second-largest share of credentials earned by students using Pell funds at 37%, distantly followed by bachelor's degrees at 10%. The share of incarcerated Pell recipients earning applied associate's and professional studies degrees was just 2%.

On the cusp of Pell expansion, much more credible student-level information is needed to understand the scope and impact of Pell Grants in prison. Specifically, more reliable information is needed regarding who receives federal student aid and who does not, and what specifically they have access to during incarceration.

Suggested citation: Aguilar Padilla, E., Castro, E. L., & Gaskill, S. (2022, October 1). *Second Chance Pell Recipients at Four Institutions: A Brief Descriptive Analysis*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison.

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Endnotes

¹ Collins, B. (2022, January 19). *The FAFSA Simplification Act* (CRS Report No. R46909). Congressional Research Service.

² Chesnut, K., Taber, N., & Quintana, J. (2022). *Second Chance Pell: Five Years of Expanding Higher Education Programs in Prisons, 2016-2021*. Vera Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/second-chance-pell-five-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison-2016-2021.pdf>

³ For example, findings in the initial evaluation of Second Chance Pell did not include pinnacle outcomes in higher education, including time-to-degree and completion rates. Additionally, information regarding student demographics such as race, sex, veteran status, and educational attainment levels were not included in the report. For more, see: U.S. Department of Education, 2020.

⁴ Castro, E. L., Royer, C., Aguilar Padilla, E., & Gaskill, S. (2022, October). *Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell: Introduction and Executive Summary*. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison. Retrieved from

⁵ Chesnut et al., 2022.

⁶ This table reports the student's age at the beginning of the respective academic year. For example, if a person was a Pell recipient in the academic year of 2017-2018 and was born in 1996, they were recorded as 22 years of age.