COLLEGE INSIDE
A newsletter about education during and after incarceration
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How San Francisco State is educating its students — and the community — about life after prison

Kianna Brabow, a chemistry major at San Francisco State University, participated in a reentry simulation designed to educate the campus and community about the challenges faced by people coming out of prison. Photo: Charlotte West/Open Campus

By Charlotte West

When Joseph Close got out of prison earlier this year, he hoped his probation officer would be there to help him. Instead, the only real support he received from the state came in the form of two $10 Target gift cards.

Close's release was sudden, to a city in Southern California where he knew no one. If it wasn't for his connections with nonprofit organizations assisting people getting out of prison, he might have been on the street. "I had nothing but clothes on my back, a bar of soap, and deodorant," he said. "I had no support."

Earlier this spring, Close shared his story at a reentry simulation at San Francisco State University. The event was organized by Project Rebound, a support program for formerly incarcerated students. The goal was to educate students and the public about the challenges people like Close face when rebuilding their lives after prison.

Those challenges range from housing, employment, and day-to-day tasks like using an ATM to navigating the bureaucracy of probation and parole. But this wasn't just a theoretical exercise — it was part of Project Rebound's efforts to reshape how the community thinks about the criminal justice system.

The 70 participants in the event, which was open to the public, included San Francisco State students, recent law school graduates, people who have incarcerated family members, and even prison officials. The diversity reflected the event's goal of educating those who had little — or only a theoretical understanding — of what reentry actually entails.

As they entered the room, participants received packets containing character assignments, fake money and a laundry list of requirements that included tasks such as obtain-

ing IDs and attending court-mandated drug treatment — everything they'd need to do over four simulated weeks.

Tables lining the edge of the room were staffed by volunteers assuming roles such as "probation officer" and "career counselor." A large hand-written "Jail" sign was taped up on one wall — representing the more than 60% of people released from jail or prison who eventually go back, sometimes for things like failing to find a job or pay a fee.

The rules were unforgiving: participants needed transportation tickets costing $1 for every move between stations. They had to show multiple IDs at each stop – but first they had to get those documents. Everyone started with $200 in fake bills — the same amount of "gate money" California gives people upon release. Every week in the simulation also brought new requirements: check in with probation, take drug tests, find housing, get a job.

Kianna Brabow, a San Francisco state chemistry major, quickly found herself struggling. When told she needed to take a UA test, she asked what that meant. "Urine analysis," someone explained. "Pee test."

By her second simulated week, Brabow was experiencing the system's financial pressures firsthand. After getting food, she went to take her drug test and tested positive. "I gotta go see my probation officer, and hopefully I don't go to jail," she said nervously.

Meanwhile, Shayla Harris, a recent law school graduate, discovered how quickly the system can re-ensnare someone. When she went to the probation station and the officer tried to charge her $40 instead of the required $30, she refused to pay the extra amount and found herself standing up against the auditorium wall in simulation jail.

The simulation even attracted Nicole Avila, the acting chief deputy warden at the nearby San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. Avila wanted to learn more about what the men she works with experience when they are released. "I'm trying to figure out how I can bring something back to the institution to better help these guys," she said.

For every person in an Illinois prison college class, another waits their turn.

By Charlotte West

For every person enrolled in higher education at Illinois prisons, someone else is waiting for their turn, according to new state data that reveals a system where access to college depends largely on where someone is incarcerated.

Right now, roughly 2,000 people in Illinois prisons are participating in higher education programs, according to a report released at the beginning of September. That's about 1 out of every 15 people incarcerated in the state. At the same time, though, another 2,000 are stuck on waiting lists to get into classes because there's not enough programming available.

Another 700 people on supervised release — Illinois' version of parole — are also enrolled in higher education, per the report. Those numbers include enrollment in both college classes, and career and technical education.

People in Illinois prisons have been on waiting lists an average of 1.3 years, according to an analysis by

Incarcerated Lewis University students sit during a class inside Sheridan Correctional Center, which is located about 70 miles southwest of Chicago. Photo: Charlotte West / Open Campus

Open Campus. Rebecca Ginsburg, director of the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, said the data about how and where incarcerated students are being served allow colleges and the Illinois Department of Corrections to make informed decisions about higher education in Illinois prisons.

"The fact that around 2,000 individuals are on waitlists — almost the same number as are actually enrolled—suggests that we need to greatly scale up [higher education in prison] in Illinois," Ginsburg said.

Research shows that participating in prison education helps people find employment after release and helps keep them from going back to

prison. In Illinois, some people who complete educational programs can also earn time off their sentences, allowing them to be released earlier.

That means lots of people locked up in Illinois want to get into higher education programs, but they routinely complain about long waitlists, or that programs simply aren't available at many prisons.

"Some of the things that hold programs back from sustainable growth include access to classroom space inside prisons and funding," Ginsburg said.

How long's the wait? Depends on geography

The data show wait lists vary wildly across Illinois, depending on the prison. The longest waits in the system are at Logan Correctional Center, the state's main women's prison, where people have been on an education wait list for an average of almost five years. The longest wait at a men's facility is at Danville Correctional Center, where people have been on wait lists an average of 4.2 years.

The system generally prioritizes educating people who are the closest to being released, but this leaves some behind for decades.

At Big Muddy River Correctional Center, one person has been on a waitlist since 2006 — nearly 19 years — and many others have been waiting more than five years. At Logan, at least seven women have been on the wait list since 2013. Most of those with the longest waits are serving life or other long sentences.

IDOC spokesperson Naomi Puzzello acknowledged the geographic disparities, saying the department is "optimistic" about expanding education with current and potential education partners, particularly in central and southern Illinois, where the need is greatest.

Many of the longest wait times are at the facilities that offer the most educational opportunities. Logan, for instance, is the only Illinois women's prison that offers significant higher education opportunities, including a bachelor's program from Northwestern University and a master's program from North Park University.

Danville offers classes from the U of I, as well as associate's and bachelor's degrees. At Sheridan prison, the waitlist has grown significantly in the last few years with the facility absorbing Northwestern's bachelor's program when Stateville Correctional Center shut down in 2024. It's also home to other programs, such as Lewis University.

Some facilities have very short waitlists — not because they efficiently serve students, but because they offer very few educational opportunities. Menard Correctional Center, the state's largest maximum security men's prison, has just eight people enrolled in higher education and eight people on the waitlist. The facility, located in far southwestern Illinois, offers only two training programs — building maintenance and small engines — but no college classes, according to the IDOC website.

Pontiac Correctional Center, a men's maximum security facility housing almost 500 people, shows no waitlist because it offers only basic education and high school equivalency programs — no college classes, according to the IDOC website.

Waitlist time down for high school-level courses

The statewide enrollment figures may appear to overstate the scope of prison-based higher education. Around 700 people — or a quarter of those the IDOC reported as being enrolled in higher education — are on supervised release. That means they are enrolled in outside institutions, not participating in prison-based classes.

The waitlists extend beyond higher education to basic literacy and high school programs. Nearly 12,000 people participated in adult basic education and high school equivalency programs, with over 5,000 more waiting for access. The report doesn't break down these waitlists by facility, but data on educational spending shows disparities across institutions.

Puzzello said that wait times are down significantly for students earning their high school equivalency within IDOC.

"With increased education staffing across facilities, more students are enrolling in and completing programs, including successfully meeting testing requirements for credentialing," Puzzello wrote in an email to WBEZ.

The data comes from a first-of-its-kind report on prison higher education published at the beginning of September. In 2023, Illinois lawmakers passed legislation requiring IDOC to annually publish detailed data about enrollment, waitlists, and spending on educational programs.

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COLLEGE INSIDE

We want to hear from you!
Write to us:

Open Campus
2460 17th Ave. #1015
Santa Cruz, CA 95062

or email/message:

charlotte@opencampusmedia.org

A new book explores trauma inside and outside prison — and how to address it

A new book, Imprisoned Minds: Lost Boys, Trapped Men, and Solutions from Within the Prison, *published in December 2024, represents an unusual academic partnership between someone who studies the criminal justice system and someone who lives within it. The book is the result of a seven-year collaboration between Erik Maloney, who is serving a life sentence in the Arizona Department of Corrections, and Kevin Wright, a criminal justice professor who directs the Center for Correctional Solutions at Arizona State University. The book's central concept – the "imprisoned mind" – explains how childhood trauma creates patterns of self-destructive thinking and behavior that can lead to incarceration.*

Charlotte West did a Zoom interview with Wright and Maloney at the end of February.

Charlotte West: Can you define the concept of "imprisoned minds" and how incarcerated people can overcome it?

Erik Maloney: An imprisoned mind is an irrational mindset that develops from untreated childhood trauma and is enhanced by drug or alcohol abuse or risky behavior. The irrational mindset is the flawed decision making ability that is void of logic and reasoning, where critical thinking is influenced by a hyperfocus on satisfying immediate desires.

How to overcome it? It's a long process. You cannot overcome the imprisoned mind without confronting your past, and then beginning to develop yourself in the present.

West: Most academic books about trauma and criminal behavior are written by outside researchers. How does Erik's insider perspective change the narrative?

Maloney: When you read psychology books talking about trauma, they very vaguely allude to guys who experience trauma as children growing up with irrational minds, but that's as far as they go. …I clearly understood what they meant, because I lived it. I had that irrational mindset. I thought, how cool it would be to actually demonstrate to the people who are writing these books what the irrational mindset looks like?

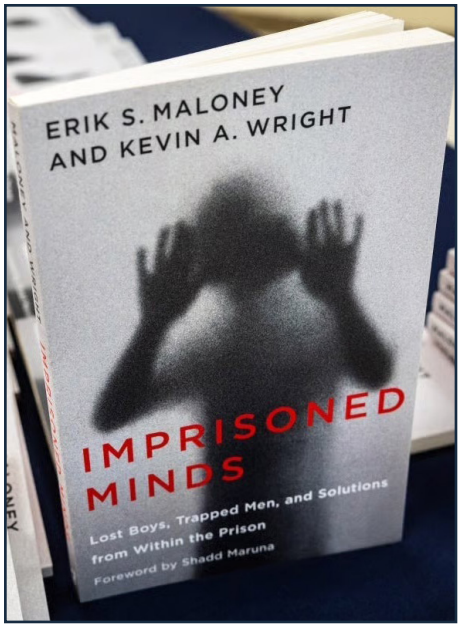
West: Erik, what has this project meant to you personally?

Maloney: This book gave me a chance to turn my own painful experiences into something that might help others. When you're serving life, finding meaning becomes essential. Through this work, I've been able to show that lifers aren't just people to be warehoused — we can contribute valuable insights precisely because of what we've lived through.

One of the things I teach in my class is what comes after the imprisoned mind. The last three lessons focus on pursuing redemption for the harms we've caused in an altruistic way—giving of oneself. Often it's learning something that can be of value to someone else and positively impact their lives. You don't need a degree for that.

West: Does the 'imprisoned minds' framework apply to women as well?

Kevin Wright: We actually took a segment of the book into our Inside-Out class with incarcerated women this semester to get their feedback. The reaction was immediate and unanimous—they absolutely felt this applied to their experiences. While the specific traumas and responses might manifest differently, the fundamental concept of childhood trauma creating irrational mindsets resonated strongly. Many of the women discussed how their past trauma affected their ability to form healthy relationships, often leading to situations



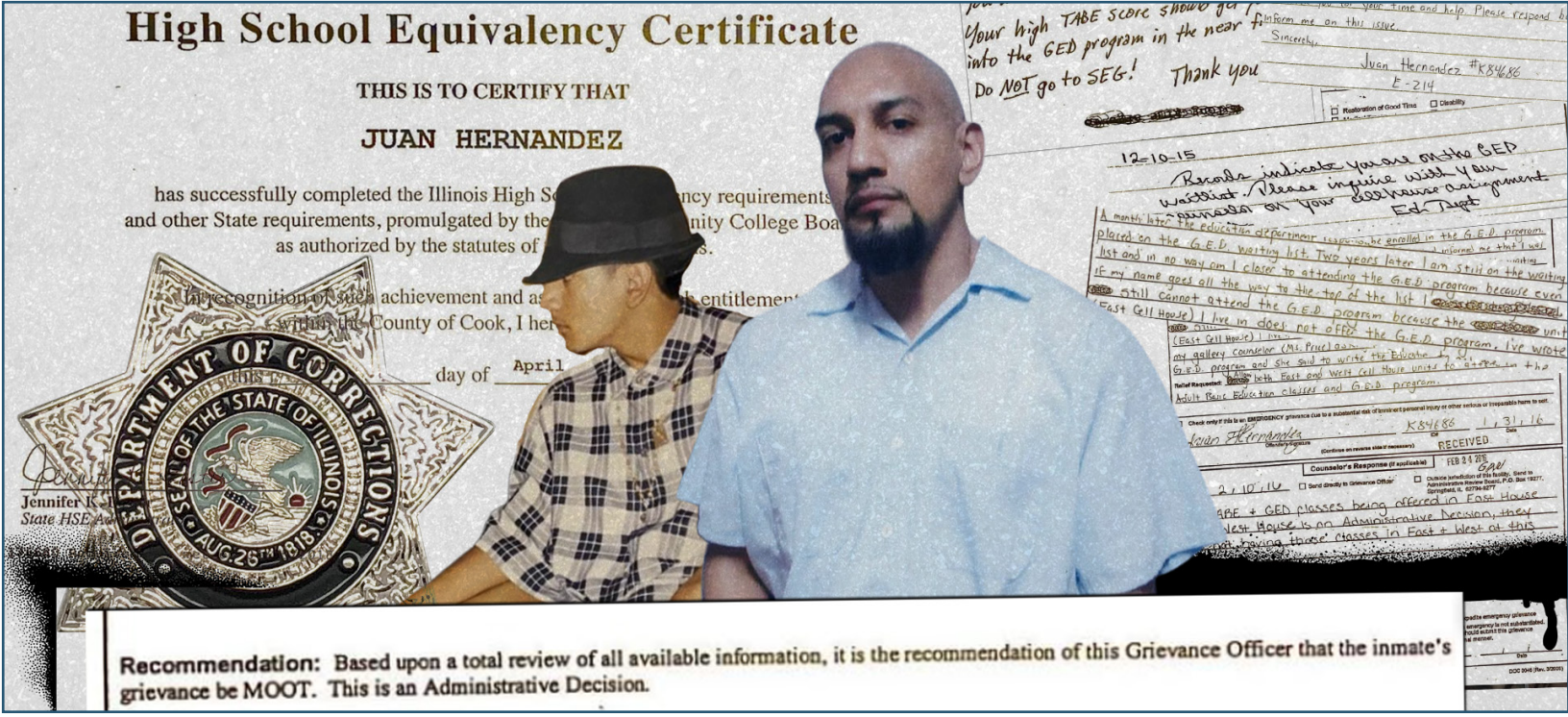
The new book is co-authored by Arizona State University Professor Kevin Wright and Erik S. Maloney, who is serving a life sentence in Arizona. Photo: Charlie Leight/ ASU News

that contributed to their incarceration.

West: What's next for this project now that the book is published?

Maloney: Getting the book published was one challenge, but the real work is just beginning—taking these concepts and turning them into practical tools that can help people overcome their imprisoned minds. That's where our focus is now – developing methods that work in the real world of prison education and beyond.

Wright: What started as a class assignment seven years ago has grown into something that could transform how we approach rehabilitation in correctional facilities across the country.



Documents provided by Juan Hernandez. Photo illustration by Emily Jenkins.

A look inside the dreaded prison education waitlist

By Charlotte West

Juan Hernandez was a teenager when he was sentenced to prison. He was 32 when he finally completed his high school education.

The nearly two decades in between tell a story of bureaucratic barriers, arbitrary rules, and one man's refusal to give up earning his education.

It's not unusual for people locked up in the Illinois Department of Corrections to wait years to get into programming, such as GED or college classes. That's especially true for people serving long sentences for serious crimes, as the state prioritizes enrollment for people who will be released from prison sooner. Hernandez was sentenced to 45 years as a teenager.

But what makes Hernandez's story unique is the paper trail he kept throughout his fight — the letters he wrote to prison officials asking for access to education, and the responses he received. The documents, which he asked a friend to post on Instagram, offer a rare window into the often-opaque process of prison education waitlists that keep thousands of incarcerated people from accessing education inside.

"I realized education might be a way forward when the administration was adamant in keeping it from me," Hernandez wrote to WBEZ from Dixon Correctional Center, where he's currently locked up. At one prison, Juan wrote that he was assigned to a cell house with 1,000 other men — all of whom were barred from education simply because of where they lived.

Officials called the policy only to allow certain units access to classes "an administrative decision" with no further explanation. When he filed a formal prisoner complaint with IDOC — known as a grievance — a prison officer found his complaint "moot."

When letters and grievances failed to get him access to education, Hernandez escalated to a hunger strike — one of the drastic steps some incarcerated people turn to when other avenues are exhausted. That ended with prison staff attempting to force-feed him, he wrote. He was eventually transferred to a different prison, where the education administrator told him his test scores helped his case — but his release date did not.

The administrator also warned him: "Do NOT go to SEG!" — shorthand for administrative segregation, otherwise known as "the hole," which is similar to solitary confinement used as punishment for people in prison who get into trouble. Months later, Hernandez was finally enrolled in GED classes and, true to a promise he made in one of his letters, passed the test on his first attempt.

It's been seven years since then. Hernandez is still waiting to get into college.

In a statement, an Illinois Department of Corrections spokeswoman said increased educational staffing since 2018 has allowed more people in prison to complete the GED program, and that wait times have "decreased significantly." The average wait time to get into GED classes is less than three months, she said.

This story was originally published on June 19, 2025.

PJP STILLWATER AWARD WINNER

In May, Hernandez won a first place Best Illustration award for his work titled "Doing for Ourselves," featured in our previous issue. The Stillwater Awards are an annual competition recognizing excellence in prison journalism.

Four takeaways from our survey on college and career after prison

This spring, in collaboration with Jobs for the Future's Center for Justice & Economic Advancement, College Inside launched a survey on college and career after incarceration. Nearly 100 formerly incarcerated people filled it out, sharing insights from their experiences with navigating higher education and the job market. (The survey remains open for anyone who wants to contribute their experiences.) Some of the most striking responses were about what people wish they had known before they came home. Here are four takeaways:

People assume degrees will open all doors while not always understanding what career paths their degrees actually enable.

Many respondents assumed that having a bachelor's degree would immediately translate into a career, while others weren't aware of the possible career paths they could take.

Maria Garza, who continued her bachelor's degree at Northwestern University after being released from the Illinois Department of Corrections, said she thought that just having a degree from a top ranked university would secure her a great job. "That would be true only if we knew what type of jobs the degree supports," she said, noting the disconnect that sometimes occurs between academia and employers.

This echoes what we heard during a listening session earlier this year with our partner WBEZ Chicago at Sheridan Correctional Center, where students pointed to the lack of basic information about professional paths. People often have limited aspirations because they don't know what's possible.

"Don't assume you're limited to trades or manual labor," wrote Jarret Orcutt, who now works in higher education in Nevada, in his survey response. "If you want to be a professor, a coder, or run your own nonprofit—you can."

The most valuable reentry information came from other formerly incarcerated people, not formal programs.

As we've heard before during our listening session in Chicago, peer support can be one of the most valuable resources for reentry.

"The most important source of information wasn't a website, a book, or a flyer — it was people," said Elon Molina, an alum of the Bard Prison Initiative in New York state who now works as a learning and development specialist for a roofing company. "Conversations with others who had already walked the path after release were my greatest resource."

But the networking challenge goes deeper than just information sharing. Professional success often depends on personal connections — something that can be particularly difficult for formerly incarcerated people who may have limited professional networks or whose previous connections may no longer be relevant to their post-release goals.

Tech is a barrier in job searches. Learning digital skills can also help build social capital.

After years or decades without technology access, people are expected to navigate a digital job market. Basic skills like filling out online applications or using LinkedIn become major barriers. L.Elizabeth Shatswell was able to secure her current position because she debated with her now-boss on a LinkedIn post — but as she noted, you need digital literacy from the very beginning just to complete job applications.

This aligns with what we found in our previous survey about technology use in prison, where respondents consistently highlighted the gap between the digital skills needed for reentry and what's available inside.

Learning digital skills can also help build social capital. As Shatswell's experience shows, being able to engage professionally online — whether through LinkedIn comments, joining industry groups, or maintaining a professional network — can open doors.

Higher education in prison can be transformative, but lack of experience remains a hurdle when job searching.

Education provides crucial personal development and opens minds to new possibilities, but employers still prioritize practical work experience that's difficult to gain while incarcerated.

"Employers did not care about my education when I was released. They wanted experience," said Tommy DeLuna, who recently graduated from Sacramento State University in California.

In response to this gap, organizations like the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and JFF are developing work-based learning initiatives to help bridge this experience gap, as we've previously reported.

AmeriCorps gave me a bridge back to society. Then Trump cut the funding.

By Kun Lyna "K" Tauch

When I walked out of prison after 18 years, I carried more than just the weight of a second chance. I brought with me the tools I spent years building. A bachelor's degree, experience leading trauma-informed groups, and the raw determination to give back to a society I once harmed. But good intentions don't pay rent. And meaningful work, the kind that makes healing possible for yourself and others, is hard to find for someone with a record and little to no experience living in the society that once kept him locked up.

That's why AmeriCorps matters.

In March 2025, I was accepted as a member of the California Justice Leaders, a partnership between AmeriCorps and the nonprofit Impact Justice aimed at supporting formerly incarcerated adults. This program has been instrumental in my professional development and in fulfilling my dream of helping others. I was placed as an intern at The Prism Way, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit focused on the holistic aspect of reentry and healing, supporting adults and youth in detention centers. It was a launching pad where my brothers and sisters taught me valuable work habits and supported me through my reentry.

This internship has allowed me to serve as a mentor, a community educator, and a support system for others coming home. I've earned certifications in anger management facilitation and as a Medi-Cal peer support specialist. It's given me the foundation to build on the education I earned while incarcerated. This was a way to apply the years of experience I had facilitating groups inside in a professional setting.

I almost lost this opportunity. At the end of April, the federal government abruptly eliminated 32,000 AmeriCorps positions nationwide and shuttered over 1,000 programs. The cuts came without warning. I heard the news early in the morning when I got an email with the subject line "Emergency Zoom Meeting."

Kun Lyna "K" Tauch is an Americorps volunteer at The Prism Way, a Los Angeles-based reentry organization. Photo courtesy of Kun Lyna "K" Tauch. Photo courtest: Kun Lyna "K" Tauch

The cuts threatened not just individual positions like mine, but the entire infrastructure of grassroots organizations that depend on AmeriCorps volunteers.

The Prism Way is a small organization and it would not have been able to hire myself and the other two interns placed there through California Justice Leaders. We helped the organization expand its programs beyond the reentry space to offer more programming inside prisons, juvenile detention centers, as well as inside the community. They would not have the staff to do any of this without us.

California Justice Leaders also places formerly incarcerated people at organizations such as Project Rebound, a program in the California State University system that supports formerly incarcerated students. At CSU San Bernardino, two Justice Leaders work as reentry navigators, helping other formerly incarcerated students and youth navigate higher education.

The AmeriCorps cuts hit formerly incarcerated volunteers particularly hard. Unlike traditional college-aged AmeriCorps volunteers, these are adult students with families and financial responsibilities. When the cuts were first announced, the navigators immediately began applying for other jobs. "They don't have the luxury of waiting around," said Michael Griggs, Project Rebound coordinator at CSU San Bernardino.

It feels scary.

I believed that federal funding was stable, and based on that assumption, I made some big decisions for myself. I rented an apartment and bought a new car. In prison, I was used to good things being taken away, and when this happened, I thought to myself, "Here it goes again." I was left to figure out if graduate school was a realistic option for me after the joy of being accepted to my MBA program at Cal State Los Angeles. The tuition, the books, and even the time that I would invest were all things I had

to figure out for myself. I chose to continue with my educational pursuit and hold on.

We got a reprieve after the initial announcement because Impact Justice was able to secure alternative funding that allowed current California Justice Leaders to continue their positions. Other organizations were also able to find ways they could keep their Americorps volunteers on staff. At CSU San Bernardino, for example, Project Rebound was able to hire their two Justice Leaders as student assistants, but only because of their student status, Griggs said. Many grassroots organizations don't have these options.

At the beginning of June, a federal judge granted a temporary block on AmeriCorps funding cuts, but only for the 24 states that sued the administration. More recently, a second federal judge ordered the Trump administration to reinstate some AmeriCorps workers who were laid off without notice.

But even programs that had their current funding restored still face an uncertain future as the federal infrastructure that supports them is being dismantled. The government has laid off over 500 full-time federal Americorps staff who administer the program, and the court cases only applied to the states or organizations that sued. It's also unclear whether the government will continue to fund the program.

As a person who learned how to be an adult in prison, this job training and work experience were a huge part of my growth as a person transitioning back into society. The California Justice Leaders program helped me build skills, assisted me in navigating reentry, gave me access to resources and then, and is now teaching me how to do it for others. I am part of a program that places formerly incarcerated programs into paid service roles, helping other justice-impacted people navigate parole, housing, job searches, and education. And as if that wasn't enough, they pay a living wage. It's not just professional development—it's public safety, trauma healing, community restoration, and building communities.

Programs like this are easy targets in a political climate that treats incarceration as a line item rather than a human experience.

Because of my experience as California Justice Leader at The Prism Way, I have seen that hope, healing, and restoration aren't just words; they're outcomes. But they only happen when people are invested. AmeriCorps gives grassroots organizations the flexibility to invest in us.

"As a person who learned how to be an adult in prison, this job training and work experience I gained through Americorps were a huge part of my growth as a person transitioning back into society."

The truth is, when you've spent 18 years learning to be an adult in prison, programs like California Justice Leaders aren't just jobs — they're bridges back to society. They're proof that our experience has value, that our pain can become our purpose.

For now, I'm going to be able to finish out my year of service and move on to the next step: starting my MBA at Cal State LA this fall. But for other formerly incarcerated people, the future of this program remains uncertain.

This story was originally published on July 21, 2025.

Kun Lyna "K" Tauch is a Cambodian American storyteller who was formerly incarcerated in California.

About this newsletter

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants for incarcerated students, and career and technical education. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a quarterly print edition that is sent to some states where it is not available on tablets. The newsletter is also available in Edovo on both Securus and GTL tablets in some states.

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