Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Prison Education

Future Implications

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, most education programs in U.S. state prison systems were halted or suspended in response to the variety of policies state and federal correctional systems implemented to prevent or contain the spread of COVID-19 among incarcerated individuals. As part of their response, many correctional systems ceased or substantially cut back on programming, including ongoing education and workforce training programs and other programs and activities. In many instances, correctional systems prevented instructors and other staff from entering prison facilities (Carson, 2021; Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022).

In this report, we examine how COVID-19 affected prison education programs within state correctional systems, including access to education programs, enrollment in these programs, educational attainment, the use of education technology, and instructional delivery, including the move to online courses and hybrid learning models. We also discuss the implications of these changes with respect to the long-term prospects of how correctional education will be provided to incarcerated individuals.

Overview and Overall Approach

We received funding from the Ascendium Education Group to undertake such a comprehensive assessment. Our overall goal was to collect critical information to help inform educators, colleges, corrections officials, and policymakers about the magnitude of the overall impact of the pandemic and its effects on access to education programs, along with options to mitigate short- and long-term adverse consequences. Our study addressed the following research questions:
1. What modifications to education programs were made by departments of corrections (DOCs) to curricula, delivery methods, and types of programs provided in response to COVID-19?
2. What were the impacts of COVID-19 on the availability and continuation of programs, student access, and program completion rates?
3. How did these impacts vary by type of program (e.g., adult basic education [ABE], adult secondary education [ASE], college programs, vocational or career and technical education [CTE])?
4. What are the long-term impacts of program and policy changes on the types of education programs being delivered and the likely effects on incarcerated students’ educational progression and attainment and skills development?

We partnered with RTI International, the Vera Institute of Justice, and the Correctional Education Association (CEA) on this research.
For this study, we first focused on understanding the overall effects of COVID-19 on the variety of education programs provided within state correctional systems. To do this, we surveyed the 50 state correctional education directors who have primary responsibility for education programs.

In addition, we had a special interest in exploring the effects of the pandemic on the college programs that are offered to incarcerated individuals in state prison systems. There has been a strong resurgence of interest over the past 15 years in providing access to these programs. This interest was spurred by the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) introduction of the Second Chance Pell (SCP) Experimental Sites Initiative in 2015, which temporarily lifted the federal ban on Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals (ED, 2015). As of July 2023, a total of 200 colleges in 48 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico have participated in the SCP Experimental Sites Initiative (Taber and Muralidharan, 2023). Furthermore, in December 2022, federal legislation was passed that provides access to Pell Grants to all incarcerated individuals. Thus, there is also great interest in the field to understand how COVID-19 affected college programs.

Methods

To answer these research questions, we undertook a multipronged approach that consisted of

- a review of published data and statistics to examine the impact of COVID-19 on prison population size and the mitigation measures undertaken by correctional authorities
- a secondary analysis of state prison data on COVID-19 infection rates to provide the context for understanding how significant COVID-19 was within the prison population
- a 2022 web survey of state correctional education directors to gather information about the overall impact of COVID-19 on prison education programs
- in-depth focus groups and interviews with state correctional education directors and their education staff to enable a deeper dive into the themes learned from the 2022 web survey
- a 2023 web survey of SCP colleges to understand the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions providing postsecondary education (PSE) programs to this population.

Table 1 summarizes the primary data collection undertaken for this study. Our initial focus was a survey of the 50 state correctional education directors who have oversight of most, if not all, of the education programs within their state’s correctional system. We were interested in learning about the near-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on such education programs as ABE, ASE, PSE, and CTE programs in their state systems. We specifically asked these directors about the effects of COVID-19 on their programs during calendar year 2020 (the first year of the pandemic). In our 2023 report on the results of this survey, Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Prison Education: Survey Results, we detail the methods we used for this data collection (see Davis et al., 2023). That report also details the methods that we used for the literature review and the secondary analysis of state prison data on COVID-19 infection rates. In section titled “Effects of COVID-19 on State Prison Education Programs,” we provide a high-level summary of the key results from that survey.

Our original plan was to conduct two waves of the survey of state correctional education directors, first in 2022 and then in late 2023, to capture the near- and the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education programs in prison. We
modified our approach because of the lessons learned during the administration of the first survey. Our 2022 survey of state correctional education directors provided us with a broad overview of the near-term effects of COVID-19 on education programs in prison. However, the survey format did not allow us to explore variations in the pandemic’s impact on different types of programs, across prison facilities, or by different types of providers or instructors, nor allow us to gather information on the long-term changes resulting from COVID-19. In consultation with CEA state directors, we decided to forgo the second survey and instead gather more in-depth information via a series of focus groups and interviews with state directors and their education staff. This allowed us to do a deeper dive on different issues raised by the 2022 survey results, explore how the impact of COVID-19 varied, and better understand the strategies states adopted to mitigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on education programs and instructional delivery. Between August and October 2023, we conducted focus groups and interviews with 22 state directors and education staff (Table 1). The state directors were given the option of participating in a focus group discussion or a telephone interview. The results of these discussions are presented in the “Effects of COVID-19 on State Prison Education Programs” section.

As noted above, we also had a special interest in understanding the effects of the pandemic on college programs being offered to incarcerated individuals in state prison systems. Our original goal was to conduct a survey of a sample of SCP and non-SCP college programs in prisons across the states to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these programs. However, in conducting background research on a possible sampling frame for the survey, we learned that the organization of in-prison college programs varies widely at the state level, with a variety of models being employed. These models include the following:

- a college or university providing a single college program in one or more prison facilities
- a college or university providing several different college programs in one or more prison facilities
- a consortium of colleges and universities providing a variety of college programs in different prison facilities
- colleges individually providing a college program in one to two prison facilities within their locality
- a consortia of colleges providing in-prison college programs that crosscut multiple states
- an online university offering online courses in multiple states.

Furthermore, there was no data source with a comprehensive list of these programs. Given the complexity of how college programs are organized and the need to hand-construct a state-by-state sampling frame that would account for the different models being employed, we decided that it was most efficient to survey only the SCP colleges. We were able to obtain a list of those programs from the Vera Institute of Justice, which provided technical assistance to the participating colleges. Because most states have SCP colleges, this adjustment still allowed us to understand how college programs for incarcerated
students were affected by the pandemic; however, we recognize that this is a limitation of our study.

Thus, the third data source is a 2023 RAND web survey of administrators from the first cohort of SCP programs in the United States. Our goal was to assess the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these SCP college programs and to gather information on the more immediate effects of COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic for each state. The Vera Institute of Justice provided us with the list of SCP colleges and contacts that we used to contact these institutions and invite them to participate in our survey. We surveyed 168 SCP program administrators from mid-August through October 2023. In the “Effects of COVID-19 on Second Chance Pell College Programs in Prison” section, we detail the methods that we used for this survey.

Focus of This Report

This is the final report for this project on how COVID-19 has affected education programs within state correctional systems from 2020 through 2023. We present the full results from our data collection to provide a comprehensive picture of the impact that COVID-19 has had on education programs in state prison systems. We summarize key trends that help set the stage for understanding our findings and present the results of the 2022 survey of state correctional education directors. We follow this with a summary of the findings from our 2023 focus group discussions and interviews with state correctional education directors and their staff on the long-term effects of the pandemic on these programs. We then present the results of the 2023 survey of SCP colleges, which drills down on the pandemic’s effects on college programs specifically. Because an important trend and effect of the pandemic is the use of technology in these programs, we summarize the results from both surveys and from the focus group discussions and interviews on the implications for technology use moving forward. Finally, we summarize the key takeaways from our study of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact and discusses issues that will continue to affect the field and need to be addressed.

Background

In this section, we summarize the key trends that help set the context for understanding the effects of COVID-19 on education programs in prison. This text is largely taken from our 2023 report, Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Prison Education: Survey Results (Davis et al., 2023). We also summarize the results of the 2022 survey on the near-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education programs in prison.

COVID-19 Accelerated an Existing Decline in the Prison Population

Since 2009, state and federal prison populations have been declining. Between 2009 and 2020, the number of incarcerated individuals under state or federal jurisdiction declined by 25 percent (Carson, 2021). Of note, there was a sharp decline in the U.S. imprisonment rate of 15 percent between 2019 and 2020 alone, which suggests that COVID-19 may have greatly reduced state and federal prison populations (Carson, 2021).

In 2021, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) conducted a survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on U.S. prison populations during the first year of the pandemic, from the end of February 2020 to the end of February 2021 (Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022). The BJS survey found that during the first year of the pandemic, the number of persons incarcerated in state and federal prisons (including those incarcerated in privately operated prisons) decreased by more than 16 percent. The most dramatic decline in the prison population occurred during the first six months of the pandemic.

The decline in prison populations during the first year of the pandemic appears to have been driven primarily by a dramatic decrease in the number of admissions to state and federal prisons (versus expedited release from prison).1 In late February 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned that dramatic mitigation measures would need to be taken to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as school closings, workplace shutdowns, and the cancelation of large gatherings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). In response, correctional systems undertook measures
to mitigate the impact of the virus, including reducing the number of admissions to prison. As a result, admissions to state and federal prisons decreased by 63 percent from March 2020 (38,256) to April 2020 (14,062) (Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022). Overall, during the first year of the pandemic, states had about 60 percent fewer admissions to prison between February 2020 and February 2021 (Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022).

**Trends in Prison COVID-19 Cases by State**

We analyzed state prison systems data from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law’s COVID Behind Bars Data Project to assess trends in the percentage of the prison population that was newly infected with COVID-19 during a two-year period from April 2020 to March 2022. These results are reported in Davis et al. (2023) and summarized here.

As shown in Figure 1, there were two major peaks of newly infected cases in the U.S. prison population; the first major peak occurred in fall 2020 (earlier than that of the U.S. general population) and the second peak occurred in winter 2022 (similar to the second peak for the U.S. general population) (Davis et al., 2023). As described in our 2023 report, Figure 1 also indicates that the timing of the fall peak varied somewhat, “with the initial peak in the prison population occurring first in the Midwestern states, and the Western states showing the highest percentage of newly infected cases in fall 2020” (Davis et al., 2023, p. 6). The peaks in the prison population were much more marked than those for the U.S. general population (not shown). These trends illustrate that when the greatest impact of COVID-19 was felt on prison education programs varied by U.S. region; the spread of the virus among the prison population was a moving target over time and varied by state and region.

In response, state correctional authorities adopted a range of measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 within state prison systems that affected all programming, including education. Results from the BJS survey showed that nearly all states provided incarcerated individuals and correctional facility staff with face masks, implemented temperature checks of staff at shift changes, implemented the isolation

**FIGURE 1**
Percentage of U.S. Prison Population Newly Infected by COVID-19, by Census Region

![Percentage of U.S. Prison Population Newly Infected by COVID-19, by Census Region](image)

SOURCE: Reproduced from Davis et al., 2023, Figure 2.

NOTE: Gray shading in the graph indicates the time frame covered by our survey of state correctional education directors: calendar year 2020 to early 2022.
or quarantine of symptomatic incarcerated individuals, and enforced sick or administrative leave of symptomatic staff in all facilities (Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022, Appendix Table 7). Thirty-nine states tested all new prisoners at admission, and 40 states automatically quarantined newly admitted prisoners in all facilities. A lockdown of prisoners in their cells occurred in all facilities in 25 states and in some facilities in 16 states.

Importantly, at some point between March 1, 2020, and February 28, 2021, seven states suspended education programs in some facilities, and 38 states completely suspended education programs in all correctional facilities (Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022, p. 15). Several states also completely suspended such programs and activities as family visitation, legal visitation, drug treatment programs, and prison labor programs, among others.

## 2022 Survey Results: Near-Term Effects of COVID-19 on Education Programs

Our 2022 survey of state correctional education directors found that the mitigation measures adopted by state correctional systems had a dramatic impact on education programs. Most of the 29 state correctional education directors who responded to our survey reported that, in 2020, instruction was either halted or suspended, and in-person instruction in particular was suspended across program types (ABE, ASE, vocational education, and college programs). This finding was particularly true for vocational education programs that, by design, require hands-on learning. Roughly one-half of respondents who responded to the survey reported a shift to self-directed, paper-and-pencil correspondence and roughly one-quarter of respondents reported a shift to online learning (either instructor-led or hybrid). In early 2022, instruction remained halted in one or more prison facilities for all program types.

The majority of state directors reported in the 2022 RAND survey that access to education and training programs was limited by the inability to move students within and between prison facilities and by a shortage of correctional officers. About one-half of state directors also reported a shortage of instructors as affecting incarcerated students’ access to programs. Nearly one-third of state directors reported that access to education and training programs was affected by an inability to transfer incarcerated students to facilities where a program was being offered. Between nine and ten state directors reported that this not only interrupted the sequencing of courses that lead to advanced credential attainment but also resulted in a mismatch between incarcerated students’ needs and available programs.

As a result, one near-term effect of the pandemic was that enrollment significantly decreased in ABE, ASE, vocational education, and college programs in 2020. The majority of state directors reported that COVID-19 decreased enrollment in ABE, ASE, vocational education, and college programs by 25 percent or between 25 percent and 50 percent. Enrollment in vocational education was affected the most by the pandemic, followed by ABE, ASE, and college programs, which were affected less, possibly because these programs were more likely to be moved online or done via correspondence. The number of credentials earned also decreased significantly in 2020.

The 2022 survey also found that COVID-19 negatively affected instructional quality in the near term. Ninety percent of state correctional education directors who responded to our survey reported short- or long-term gaps in instruction and an inability to administer assessments (e.g., high school equivalency tests, industry-recognized certification exams, academic placement tests). Importantly, for vocational education and college programs in prison, a majority of state directors reported that the pandemic resulted in an inability to provide hands-on instruction in these two areas. Sixty percent of directors also cited reduced access to instructional materials, lower student motivation and performance, and a negative impact on student and instructor communications.

At the same time, we found that COVID-19 helped accelerate the adoption of online and hybrid learning models and the use of technology for education programs in prison. Seventeen state directors reported that in 2020, their DOCs provided access to online education materials to help mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and training programs. The state directors also reported that the pandemic helped spur a focus on online
mitigate the transmission of COVID-19, including the lockdown of prisoners in cells, isolation or quarantine of symptomatic incarcerated individuals, and suspension of education and other programming.

These mitigation measures had a dramatic effect on education programs in 2020, including the halt or suspension of instruction and/or the suspension of in-person instruction across all program types (ABE, ASE, CTE, and college programs). This led many state correctional education directors to shift to self-directed, paper-and-pencil correspondence and, in some cases, to online learning (either instructor-led or hybrid). In early 2022, instruction remained halted in one or more prison facilities for all program types. Feedback from interviews and focus group discussions with state correctional education directors indicated that, on an ongoing basis, instruction is halted in individual prison facilities whenever there is a COVID-19 outbreak.

Access to education and vocational training programs was severely limited because of limitations in the movement of students within and between prison facilities and a shortage of instructors and correctional officers needed to support these programs. A near-term effect of the pandemic was that enrollment significantly decreased in 2020 across all program types, with vocational education programs, which require hands-on learning, particularly affected. In addition, the number of credentials earned decreased significantly in 2020. As we discuss in the “Effects of COVID-19 on the Use of Technology in Prison Education” section, we found that COVID-19 helped accelerate the adoption of online and hybrid learning models and the use of technology for prison education programs.

Effects of COVID-19 on State Prison Education Programs

In the United States, state correctional education directors are typically responsible for all education programs provided within the correctional system. The RAND February 2022 web survey of the 50 state correctional education directors gathered detailed information on the near-term impact of COVID-19 on education programs in state prison systems (Davis
et al., 2023). As summarized previously, the RAND survey sought to gather information on the initial response to and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic covering calendar year 2020. The survey, however, did not allow us to explore variations in the pandemic’s effects on different types of programs, across prison facilities, or by different types of providers or instructors, nor allow us to gather information on the long-term changes resulting from COVID-19.

To gather more in-depth information in these areas, we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with the state directors to better understand COVID-19’s long-term impact, how the impact of COVID-19 varied, and the long-term changes made to education programs as a result. The state directors were given the option of participating in a focus group discussion or a telephone interview. The focus groups and interviews were conducted between August 2023 and October 2023. A total of 22 state directors and education staff participated in these discussions. In the following sections, we provide a summary of the findings from our qualitative analysis of these data and the key themes that emerged from our discussions, as well as the insights the state directors provided on the long-term effects of the pandemic on prison education programs. We contrast the interviews and focus groups results with the earlier survey results.

Key Themes on Longer-Term Effects of COVID-19 on Education Programs in Prison

As already noted, the survey results of state correctional education directors indicated that the impact of the mitigation measures taken by state DOCs on education programs was dramatic, with instruction either halted or suspended and/or in-person instruction suspended across program types (ABE, ASE, CTE, and college programs) in 2020. This was particularly true for vocational education programs that, by design, require hands-on learning. Roughly one-half of state directors who responded to the survey reported a shift to self-directed, paper-and-pencil correspondence, and roughly one-quarter of respondents reported a shift to online learning (either instructor-led or hybrid). In early 2022, instruction remained halted in one or more prison facilities for all program types.

Discussions in fall 2022 with state correctional education directors and education staff acknowledged that COVID-19 is ongoing, which requires a flexible approach to instructional delivery. The state directors commented that, although they are returning to face-to-face classes in their states, when there is a COVID-19 outbreak or when some units have to go on lockdown, they still refer back to the initial modifications they made for COVID-19 in 2020. Namely, paper-and-pencil packets are delivered to students in their housing units. How frequently this happens depends on the facility. As one director commented,

We’re still social distancing everywhere. We’re still mostly doing hybrid learning: part in class face-to-face, part in-unit study. Depending on the current situation within their facility, some units are on remote learning-only with the package delivery or we have laptops as well. Right now, we have two facilities that have some sort of a lockdown with this summer quarter alone. I think at one point we were at six facilities. So, our state is still pretty cautious and [it has] not released [many] of the COVID precautions from two years ago.

According to the state directors, the impact on instructional delivery varied by type of program, with the greatest impact on vocational or CTE programs that require hands-on learning or apprenticeship-type training, such as welding or construction programs. These programs require a certain amount of laboratory time and hands-on learning compared with more traditional classroom- and lecture-based programs, such as business classes. Furthermore, the directors commented on the difficulty of getting instructors—many of whom are hired as contractors—for CTE-type programs, especially following the height of the pandemic, when it became difficult for correctional systems to compete with private sector salaries.

In certain areas it is virtually impossible to find CTE instructors because industry is paying more.
We use a lot of contract instructors in CTE—a lot of the contractors had worked in the system—most were retired. Now those folks are gone, so we lost a lot of our contracts. Now rebidding and [it is] hard to get contractors to bid on CTE positions.

People have a lot of opportunities. To retrain them, we have had to provide salary raises, do off-site team building activities, and do a lot of outreach. Most challenging time I have ever seen.

Staff shortages in general were another outcome of the pandemic and have continued to be problematic, affecting student transfers and the ability of state prison systems to provide education programs. In addition to the shortage of CTE instructors, there is a shortage of education instructors. As one director put it, anyone who could retire did so:

Bringing new folks [instructors] onboard is challenging in that if they could find something more lucrative, they moved on quickly, so we had a lot of staff turnover.

A shortage of correctional officers has been an ongoing issue, starting before the pandemic, that many DOCs face. In the 2022 survey, the majority of state directors reported that access to education and training programs was affected by a shortage of correctional officers. In the 2023 focus group discussions, the directors explained the implications of this shortage: Because of the correctional officer shortage, officers were pulled from education units to staff other locations that were deemed essential. Pulling a correctional officer away from an education building meant that classes had to be shut down; education was often deemed a nonessential post. Furthermore, education staff might be assigned to work in noneducation locations, such as the warehouse or kitchen, to help with the shortage of correctional officers in these locations. As a result, several state directors perceived that education became the stepchild of rehabilitative programming when COVID-19 hit.

Whether it be shortage of [education] staff, not being able to be open, or taking the teachers and putting them in the kitchen, instead of allowing them to try and get materials to their students, the needs of the facility 100% came before the [education] needs of the students.

I think there should have been a balance of priorities. I do see that the teachers needed to step up and help out. But I think that we missed the mark in not keeping those students engaged as a priority.

These staff shortages, along with repeated COVID-19 outbreaks, contributed to limitations in the movement of students within and between prison facilities early in the pandemic, which together resulted in reduced access to education and training programs. Reduced access to these programs continued in 2023. For example, about one-half of the state directors surveyed reported that a shortage of instructors affected incarcerated students’ access to programs in 2020, and nearly one-third reported an inability to transfer incarcerated students to facilities where a program was being offered. Nine state directors reported that this not only interrupted the sequencing of courses that lead to advanced credential attainment, but ten directors reported that this also resulted in a mismatch between incarcerated students’ needs and available programs. Discussions with the state directors revealed that these access issues continued to be problematic in 2023 as a result of staff shortages, continued shutdowns of facilities when outbreaks occur, and limitations in student transfers to prison facilities with programs.

As a result, enrollment significantly decreased across all education program types. For example, the majority of state directors surveyed reported that early in 2020, COVID-19 decreased enrollment across all education programs, with vocational education the most affected by the pandemic; ASE or college programs were less affected, possibly because these programs were more likely to be moved online or done via correspondence. In addition, the number of credentials earned decreased significantly in 2020. Variations in when instruction stopped and started continued to have a dramatic effect on completion rates. In 2023, the state directors discussed how completion rates and credentials earned continued to be problematic:
Before COVID, we had a three-year strategic plan, but it got thrown out the window during COVID. The reality is there are now some things that we’ve had to be laser-focused on, that have been highlighted as a result of COVID. For instance, a significant number of people have been released without high school credentials. For us, one student is too many. It was alarming. We are now laser-focused about not releasing people without [their high school credentials]. We have levels of workload that we put into ensuring and identifying, every month, who is releasing in the next year that’s not actively in a program? Why are they not? And how are we getting them in there right now? Whether that’s hiring more teachers, whether it’s bumping somebody out who’s got five more years to do [in prison], whatever.

In 2023, some of the state directors perceived that the resulting reduction in class sizes and the number of students enrolled in education programs was a mixed bag:

Classroom size reduction is also a double-edged sword. So, some students can get more hands-on instruction from instructors in the classroom, but that also means that the wait list is longer for students that could potentially be released [from prison] without getting into the classroom. So, on one hand, it’s good because they can get more attention from the instructor, but then also we have wait lists.

Probably the most important effect of the pandemic is that it spurred early on the use and adoption of technology for instructional delivery and helped accelerate the adoption of online and hybrid learning models. Seventeen state directors surveyed reported that, in 2020, their DOCs provided access to online education materials to help mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and training programs. When asked about benefits from the pandemic, 17 state directors reported that it improved student access to technology and online education content. In 2023, all state directors commented on the importance of online learning and hybrid learning models:

The pandemic actually opened doors to using technology for instructional delivery.
The one thing that COVID did within our state is it actually started the conversations for IT [information technology]. Some of the conversations about even approaching internet access for our population . . . upper administration would shut it down immediately—“We’re not going there, it’s not secure”—and now at least they’re having those conversations.

The importance of virtual education and hybrid learning was cited by several state directors:

It’s very important that we have virtual education available to us. Prior to COVID, we were 100% paper and pencil.

We lost a lot of time with our students, and so our GED testing was way down because of COVID because they just weren’t ready. If we can go virtual, if we have opportunities to have them studying in their cells, then those who are motivated can keep moving forward. I’m not trying to eliminate their classroom contact. I’m trying to give additional contact to those who are really motivated so that in the event of a facility lockdown, we have something available so they can keep moving forward.

Digital literacy is critical. I mean this [was] always an issue even before COVID, but COVID catapulted the community forward with technology. Students who never have been able to use Zoom are being released into a world where everything is entirely on Zoom, even setting up a doctor’s appointment, now you have to do it entirely online before you can even walk through that door. COVID really highlighted how much we need to do with digital literacy.

However, state directors in 2023 commented that some instructors have mixed feelings about the use of technology in education programs and concerns that technology would replace teachers:

My teachers fall into two groups—some embrace it; some are resistant. Depends on where they are in their career. If they’re close to that retirement age, they don’t want to change.

The reservation I have is less about the technology and more about correctional administration, because if technology is so good and can do so much, why do we need teachers? And I’ve even heard that phrase said.

I don’t care how good the technology is. There is nothing out there that’s going to give the same benefit to that student as the teacher working with them.

For me, I think it’s the misinterpretation that teachers are not needed in the environment. I’ve lost 20 teaching positions since COVID-19—these positions were phased out partly because the administration thinks that technology will pick up the slack.

State directors in 2023 also discussed their concerns that basic skills students in particular were negatively affected by the move to using technology for education programs. They perceived that these students especially benefited from daily interaction with faculty and tended to have the lowest digital literacy, struggling with the use of laptops. For example, one director noted that they did not anticipate literally having to teach these students, in some cases, how to turn on a computer.

Last, the impact of the pandemic was also felt on student motivation and instructor morale. State directors in 2023 explained:

When we first came off of any kind of lockdown, the students wanted time out in the yard. They were sick and tired of being in their cells. So the idea of coming to see us [attending classes] was way down on the list for them.

There is a sense of burnout. It’s that people are tired. They are just tired mentally, emotionally, they’re drained. All of us, instructors, our deans, the people who make it all happen, and I think students, too, have some of that as well.

Burnout perhaps isn’t the right word. Feeling drained is the right word. People just feel like they’re just getting their energy sucked out of them in different ways.

As an instructor, you can only do so much with the energy you have when you’re, like, asking, do I have students today, do I not have students today? Do I have a full unit; do I have
no unit? Until COVID’s over, we’re done, and it seemed like for a while it was changing every day, every morning or afternoon.

Summary

The insights from the in-depth discussions with state correctional education directors underscore that COVID-19 continues to affect education programs in a variety of ways, including instructional delivery, access and enrollment, credentials earned, and student and instructor morale. Importantly, a shortage of instructors and correctional officers continues to be a long-term issue for correctional systems. Vocational training programs have been particularly affected by these shortages. As a result, the pandemic set back many students in their education progression and affected both student and instructor morale. Concerns about students’ lack of access to education opportunities led some educators to return to basics by focusing on helping students earn their high school credentials before being released from prison. This is a setback from the important strides correctional education had made to ensure that a continuum of education opportunities from ABE to PSE and CTE is available to individuals in prison. The most dramatic effect of the pandemic was the accelerated adoption of education technology, access to online courses, and the move toward hybrid education models.

Effects of COVID-19 on Second Chance Pell College Programs in Prison

Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing interest in expanding higher education in prisons at the federal and state levels, particularly expansions that offer individuals a path to degrees or industry-recognized credentials (Davis et al., 2023). An important initiative that helped propel the creation of college programs for incarcerated individuals was the ED’s 2015 SCP Experimental Sites Initiative, which temporarily lifted the federal ban on Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals who otherwise met Title IV eligibility requirements (ED, 2015). Under the initiative, a Pell Grant could be used to help pay for a student’s PSE and training, as long as the individual was eligible to be released from prison (Davis, 2019). In 2016, ED selected 67 colleges in 28 states for the initial rollout of SCP, and in 2020, ED expanded SCP to include a total of 130 colleges (Chesnut, Taber, and Quintana, 2022). As of July 2023, a total of 200 colleges in 48 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico have participated in the SCP Experimental Sites Initiative (Taber and Muralidharan, 2023).

When Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act as part of the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Public Law 116-260, 2020), that legislation reinstated access to federal Pell Grants for individuals incarcerated in state or federal correctional facilities. Known as Pell Restoration, the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Simplification Act reinstated access to Pell Grants for a broader group of individuals, including those in prisons, jails, and juvenile and civil commitment settings (Association of American Universities, 2020; Martinez-Hill, 2021). ED published a final rule on Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals in the Federal Register on October 28, 2022, and the final rule took effect on July 1, 2023 (Weisman, 2023).

Given this context, there has been great interest in understanding the effects of COVID-19 on college programs in prison. Therefore, we decided to undertake an additional survey that focused specifically on understanding the experiences of SCP college programs.

Goals and Methodology

Our original goal was to survey a sample of college programs in prisons (both SCP and non-SCP participating institutions) across states to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these programs. However, in conducting background research on a possible sampling frame, we learned that the organization of in-prison college programs varies widely at the state level with a variety of models being employed, including the following:
• a college or university providing a single college program in one or more prison facilities
• a college or university providing several different college programs in one or more prison facilities
• a consortium of colleges and universities providing a variety of college programs in different prison facilities
• colleges individually providing a college program in one to two prison facilities within their locality
• a consortium of colleges providing in-prison college programs that crosscut multiple states
• an online university offering online courses in multiple states.

Given the complexity of how college programs are organized and the need to hand-construct a state-by-state sampling frame that would account for the different models being employed, we decided that it was most efficient to survey the SCP colleges. Given that most states have SCP colleges, this adjustment would still allow us to understand how college programs for incarcerated students were affected by the pandemic.

Specifically, we decided to focus our survey on the first cohort of higher education institutions participating in SCP. Our goal was to gather information on the more-immediate effects of COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic for SCP program states and to assess the long-term impact of the pandemic on SCP college programs. The Vera Institute of Justice provided us with a list of SCP colleges and contacts that we used to contact these institutions and to invite them to participate in our survey. We surveyed 168 SCP program contacts between mid-August and the end of October 2023.

In designing the survey, we first reviewed existing questionnaires, including a 2013 RAND survey of state correctional education directors (Davis et al., 2014) and surveys that had been developed by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and the Vera Institute of Justice. We also drew on the subject-matter expertise of our team members and our Vera Institute of Justice partners to draft the questionnaire. We used an iterative approach to develop and refine the survey items. Team members beta tested the web version of the survey, and it was refined based on their feedback.

The final version of the web survey comprised 15 items focused on the impact of COVID-19 and was designed to be completed within 15 minutes. The survey asked SGP college program administrators questions about the state in which their SCP programs were located, the number of prisons their programs currently served, the number of students currently being served by their SCP programs, and the instructional delivery approach they were currently using. For questions intended to assess the impact of COVID-19, we asked whether COVID-19 was currently affecting their programs and, if so, to tell us in what ways and for what reasons. We also asked what effects, if any, the COVID-19 pandemic had at the height of the pandemic for their state and on their programs, including instructional delivery, number of courses offered, student access, student motivation, instructor morale, and the financial aid and enrollment process. We also asked questions about their use of technology for education purposes prior to the pandemic and as a result of COVID-19. The technology results are reported in the “Effects of COVID-19 on the Use of Technology in Prison Education” section.

An email invitation with a link to the web survey was sent to each SCP program representative. Follow-up was conducted with nonrespondents via email reminders. We had a 53 percent response rate and partially completed surveys comprised an additional 7 percent. The results, presented in the next section, are based on completed surveys only. The data were analyzed descriptively, drawing out common themes across the responses.

Survey Results
Overview of Program Respondents and Their Characteristics
The survey respondents were predominantly college or university staff (77.6 percent) who oversee or administer their SCP program. In 16 cases, the survey was completed by DOC staff who oversee the SCP program in their state. The number of colleges that comprised the SCP programs of the survey
respondents was on average one college; however, the range was from one to ten colleges.

The number of prison facilities currently served by SCP programs ranged from one prison facility (35.5 percent of respondents) to two prison facilities (25 percent of respondents) and four or more prison facilities (27.6 percent of respondents). Four respondents indicated that their SCP program was not currently serving a prison facility. See Table 2.

Current Student Enrollment and Instructional Delivery Approach

About two-thirds of survey respondents currently had an enrollment of 100 students or fewer in their SCP programs. Specifically, 34.2 percent of survey respondents reported a current student enrollment of 50 students or fewer per semester or term; 24.7 percent had an enrollment of between 51 and 100 students.

Instructional delivery was predominantly in-person instruction only (71.2 percent of respondents), followed by instructor-led online learning (19.2 percent) or hybrid in-person and online learning (19.2 percent). See Table 3.

Effects of COVID-19 on Second Chance Pell Programs

Respondents were instructed to consider the effects of COVID-19 on their SCP programs at the height of the pandemic in their state. They were instructed to check all responses that applied.7

Nearly half of respondents (48.7 percent) reported that, at the height of the pandemic, COVID-19 resulted in instruction being canceled and 40.8 percent reported a reduction in the number of courses that could be offered.8 In addition, the pandemic affected instructional delivery, going from in-person to online or hybrid learning (34.2 percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role with respect to the SCP program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOC staff who oversee the SCP program</td>
<td>16 (21.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university staff who oversee or administer the SCP program</td>
<td>59 (77.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of colleges comprising the respondent’s SCP program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (standard deviation)</td>
<td>1.51 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median [minimum, maximum]</td>
<td>1.00 [0, 10.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of prisons currently served by the respondent’s SCP program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 prison</td>
<td>27 (35.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 prisons</td>
<td>19 (25.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 prisons</td>
<td>4 (5.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more prisons</td>
<td>21 (27.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: N = 76. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
motivation, persistence, and/or academic performance. Reasons cited by respondents as to why COVID-19 was continuing to affect their SCP college programs included shortages of correctional officers (three respondents) and instructors (two respondents), continued COVID-19 outbreaks (four respondents), low student enrollment (three respondents), and a lack of classroom space (two respondents).

With their written comments to the survey question, respondents explained how COVID-19 had affected SCP programs, including (1) reduced numbers of students in a classroom because of COVID-19 protocols, (2) students missing in-person instruction because of isolation protocols or transfers to other prison yards, (3) difficulties in student communication with instructors or peers about assignments or exams, and (4) students getting discouraged and dropping out of the program. In addition, respondents wrote that instructors were not being allowed into the prison facilities, and, in one instance, all instructor contracts were canceled during the pandemic.

A majority of respondents also indicated that the pandemic led to reductions in communication between college instructors and students (55.3 percent) and reductions in student access to instructional materials, tools, and supports (46.1 percent) (Table 4). The effect of the pandemic on instructor and student morale also was significant. Forty-three percent of respondents reported a negative impact on student motivation, persistence, and/or academic performance; 30.3 percent of respondents reported a negative impact on instructor morale.9

At the time of the survey, eight out of ten respondents indicated that COVID-19 was no longer affecting their college programs in prison (not shown). Nine SCP programs were still affected with (1) an increased reliance on distance learning, (2) reduced student access to college courses because of course cancellations or reductions in the number of courses offered, and (3) negative effects on communication between instructors and students and on student

of respondents) or from in-person to correspondence learning (38.2 percent of respondents). See Table 4.

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At the end of the survey, we included an open-ended question asking respondents to provide feedback based on their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and what changes, if any, they were planning to implement for their college programs. We asked respondents to provide feedback with respect to instructional delivery and instructors, as well as overall changes.

With respect to changes in instructional delivery, the overwhelming majority of the comments indicated a move toward hybrid or online learning. Respondents commented on their intent to further explore online learning and remote education opportunities, including working toward an online model with a learning management system (LMS):

We now have laptops and Canvas learning platform for all our students. This will allow us to make a pivot to online/hybrid instruction
With respect to changes to instruction, several respondents commented on the (1) need to provide more training to instructors on developing dual-modality options for courses, (2) the need to provide better instructional supports for converting classes to hybrid or remote instruction, and (3) the need to expand the instructor pool to include those with experience teaching in dual-modality formats. Some survey respondents, however, also lamented the general struggle to hire more instructors.

Summary

Unlike many of the other education programs offered to students in prison, college programs rely on colleges or universities bringing in instructors to teach college coursework to incarcerated students. The experiences of the surveyed SCP college programs offer insights that arguably can be generalized to the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on college programs in prison.

Nearly one-half of SCP administrators who responded to the survey reported that, at the height of the pandemic, COVID-19 resulted in the cancelation of instruction and reductions in the number of courses offered. Although many college administrators would argue that in-person instruction is the gold standard for these programs, similar to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect of COVID-19</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disruptions in the ability to administer financial aid advising or counseling to our students</td>
<td>39 (51.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short- or long-term delays in the financial aid application process</td>
<td>31 (40.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short- or long-term gaps in the enrollment process</td>
<td>32 (42.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced the number of students who could be enrolled in the SCP program</td>
<td>25 (32.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced the number of students applying to the SCP program</td>
<td>23 (30.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased the number of students applying to the SCP program</td>
<td>4 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16 (21.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: N = 76. Survey respondents were asked to mark all that apply. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

easier and allow us to use the same strategies as we did on campus during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic advanced the priority of online access to our incarcerated students.

Some form of distance learning and hybrid instruction is probably going to continue even beyond pandemic issues.

However, several SCP respondents wrote that in-person learning is still a priority and that their college programs were returning to in-person instruction where possible:

A key lesson we drew from the pandemic was the importance of in-person learning. We are fully committed to in-person courses, advising, and tutoring, as well as college activities and events.

Face-to-face instruction is BEST and the gold standard of a college education.

We are rapidly returning to in-person instruction. We find students are much more motivated and involved in the coursework when the instructor is in the room.

With respect to changes to instruction, several respondents commented on the (1) need to provide more training to instructors on developing dual-modality options for courses, (2) the need to provide better instructional supports for converting classes to hybrid or remote instruction, and (3) the need to expand the instructor pool to include those with experience teaching in dual-modality formats. Some survey respondents, however, also lamented the general struggle to hire more instructors.
effects on other education programs as previously described, the pandemic has moved some instructional delivery for college programs toward online or hybrid learning.

Importantly, the pandemic led to a reduction in communication between college instructors and students and a reduction in student access to instructional materials, tools, and supports. The negative effects of the pandemic on instructor morale and student motivation, persistence, and/or academic performance were significant.

For these programs, being able to assist students with course enrollment and applications for financial aid via Pell Grants is an important step in enabling students to undertake college coursework. The pandemic significantly affected this process, with one-half of respondents saying that the pandemic disrupted their ability to administer financial aid advising or counseling to their students. As a result, 40 percent of respondents reported that this disruption caused delays in the financial aid application process and in the enrollment process. And one-third of respondents reported that the pandemic led to a reduction in the number of students who could enroll in their SCP programs and in the number of students applying for these programs. Written comments highlighted the negative effects of the pandemic on student morale, motivation, and persistence.

**Effects of COVID-19 on the Use of Technology in Prison Education**

As noted previously, the pandemic increased the adoption and expansion of technology in education programs in prisons. In this section, we provide more detail about these changes as reported by those who participated in the 2022 survey of state correctional education directors, the 2023 survey of SCP program administrators, and the interviews and focus group discussions we conducted in fall 2023 with state correctional education directors and their education staff.

**Impact of COVID-19 on Technology Access and Use**

Changes in technology access and use may have already been in process prior to 2020, but these changes were accelerated in response to the pandemic. According to those who responded to the 2022 survey of state correctional education directors, 15 state DOCs began allowing access to technology during the pandemic, in addition to the 17 state DOCs that permitted access prior to the pandemic (Table 6). Thirteen directors said that their states purchased new technology to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, while 12 reported purchasing new technology in accordance with pre-pandemic plans. Purchases included tablets, laptops, LMS, online curricula or textbooks, and videoconferencing services. Only four directors who responded to the survey said that their DOCs did not purchase any new technology to support prison education. Table 6 summarizes these responses.

Some state correctional education directors provided additional detail about the expansion of technology in open-ended questions in the 2022 survey and during the 2023 focus groups and interview discussions. Several directors indicated that they purchased new tablets and provided restricted internet access to students either in the school area or in housing units. A few directors said that the pandemic prompted them to begin the process for allowing internet access, including having conversations with their DOC IT staff and determining what online content should be made allowable.

The state correctional education directors’ responses about technology access during the pandemic were similar to the 2023 survey responses received from SCP program administrators. Approximately 26 of 76 SCP administrators said that they had to change the delivery of instruction from in-person to online or hybrid (Table 7). Respondents also reported shifting to correspondence (29 respondents), reducing the number of courses that could be offered (31 respondents), or canceling instruction (37 respondents). Thirty-six SCP program administrators also said that new hardware, software, or other technology infrastructure was purchased as a result of the pandemic, with 28 administrators reporting
that the pandemic (1) demonstrated the need for and effectiveness of in-person instruction, student access to online content, and secure internet access; (2) sped up the adoption of and experimentation with technology for education programs; and (3) helped convince DOC administration of the need to invest in technology (see the box following Table 8).

According to the state correctional education directors who participated in the 2023 focus group discussions and interviews, increased technology access also benefited students by improving their digital literacy skills in preparation for reentry. As noted by one director,

> [p]art of what we're doing with our individuals is trying to not rehabilitate them, but habilitate them, so that when they [leave prison], they're

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to online education materials permitted by state DOC&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic</td>
<td>15 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the COVID-19 pandemic</td>
<td>17 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchased new technology hardware or software since March 2020&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology purchased specifically to mitigate the impact of the pandemic</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology purchased in line with plans made before the pandemic</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No technology purchased</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific technology purchased since March 2020&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablets</td>
<td>14 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptops</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMS</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online curricula or textbooks</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videoconferencing services</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop computers</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5 (17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Davis et al., 2023, Table 5.
NOTE: This table presents results from the 2022 RAND survey of state correctional education directors.
<sup>a</sup> Survey respondents were asked to check yes or no for each item.
<sup>b</sup> Survey respondents were asked to check yes or no for each item.
<sup>c</sup> Survey respondents were asked to check all that apply.
<sup>d</sup> Other technology purchased included interactive televisions with touchscreen capability, Chromebooks, National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) training, computer cameras, headphones, 360-degree microphones, white boards, and Smartboards (question 19 written responses).

More technology resulted in a variety of benefits to education programs in prisons. According to the 2022 survey of state correctional education directors, more than one-half of respondents reported that their students gained access to online education content (Table 8). More than one-half of respondents also said they learned that the hybrid learning model—which combines in-person and virtual instruction—could be an effective instructional delivery approach. Four survey respondents indicated that technology access improved communication between students and instructors. These and other benefits are listed in Table 8. In their written responses to open-ended survey questions, the directors also underscored that their colleges covered the costs of these new technologies. Table 7 summarizes these responses.
### TABLE 7
Impact of COVID-19 on Technology Use by Second Chance Pell Colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effect of COVID-19 on mode of instructional delivery</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed the delivery of instruction from in-person to online or hybrid</td>
<td>26 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed the delivery of instruction from in-person to correspondence</td>
<td>29 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced the number of courses that could be offered</td>
<td>31 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caused instruction to be canceled</td>
<td>37 (49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purchased new technology hardware or software as a result of pandemic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology purchased</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No technology purchased</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paid for new technologies</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university</td>
<td>28 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOC or prison</td>
<td>28 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technology used in SCP program</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablets</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptops</td>
<td>28 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMS</td>
<td>24 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online curricula or textbooks</td>
<td>20 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videoconferencing services</td>
<td>26 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop computers</td>
<td>35 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18 (24%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: This table presents results from the 2023 RAND survey of SCP administrators.*

*a* Survey respondents were asked to check yes or no for each item.

### TABLE 8
Benefits Cited from Department of Corrections’ Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beneficial Changes</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved student access to technology or online education content</td>
<td>17 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid learning model shown to be effective</td>
<td>17 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved communication between students and instructors</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: This table presents results from the 2022 RAND survey of state correctional education directors. N = 29.*
able to do the same thing in the community. They’re not going to go out to a public school, college, whatever and do everything on paper and pencil. So, the whole concept of teaching the virtual component is critical to their reentry too.

Another director described the benefits as follows:

COVID catapulted the community forward in terms of technology; [the] entire world now is on Zoom; so if you’re thinking students that haven’t been able to use Zoom are now releasing into a world where everything has been entirely on Zoom, even setting up a doctor’s appointment and these small things that they may have been used to just walking into the Department of Licensing and working with them, now you have to do it entirely online before you can even walk through that door . . . to students that haven’t yet even been able to connect to the internet or turn on a laptop or function with those things, digital literacy is important.

**Staff Impact on Technology Adoption**

Technology adoption depended on support from DOC staff, including IT staff and instructors. According to the state correctional education directors who participated in the 2023 focus groups, IT staff in some states were instrumental in addressing technology challenges. One director described the IT staff’s role as follows:

They’ve been great getting the laptops out, learning new things, troubleshooting. We have had a couple security breaches. They reacted quickly. They are fixing them, problem solvers, dynamite employees. I think that we have too many devices for the staff that we have though, the ratio is off. And so their time is pulled. And so I think as a state, we need more support in IT if we’re going to continue going this way. Otherwise, we have to pick and choose which programs have some of it and which ones do not, just based on capacity. And that’s an equity issue for us. And so, we’ve got to figure it out.

Even when IT staff were supportive, implementation at each facility varied because of differences in facility COVID-19 outbreaks and security concerns. For example, one director reported that a facility warden would not allow tablets in the housing units because he did not have the staff capacity to manage it. But the state correctional education directors remained steadfast that technology use would continue to progress in prison education. As one director noted, “I know the realistic side of it, that there is always going to be somebody that beats the system, but that doesn’t give me reservations. It doesn’t mean we should stop. We should continue to move forward.”

Instructors also could be facilitators or barriers to technology adoption. As one state correctional education director pointed out, instructors’ willingness to begin using technology depended on where they were in their careers. The director said, “I always get, and it’s the same instructor all the time, I’ve been here 22 years and that’s not going to work. I know my students. That’s not going to work.”

Another director described a similar experience:

Before COVID, they were like, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. We just do it this way. I’ve been doing this forever.” And frankly, we had to up-skill them on how to use Canvas, even in

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**Details of Benefits That Resulted from Departments of Corrections’ Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

- Demonstrated the need for and effectiveness of in-person instruction
- Demonstrated the need for student access to online content and secure internet access
- Sped up the adoption of technology and the move to a hybrid learning model
- Convinced the administration of the benefits of investing in technology for correctional education
- Allowed for some experimentation with technology to occur
- Taught us how to be more innovative in our delivery of education services

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Davis et al., 2023, Table 7.
Summary

The pandemic accelerated the adoption and expansion of technology in education programs in prison. According to state correctional education directors and SCP administrators, the pandemic served to fast-track discussions with DOCs on allowing internet access to support online and hybrid learning to avoid future widespread disruptions in instructional delivery. It also opened the door to other technologies that enhance the learning experience for students and improve their digital literacy skills. Although state correctional education directors and SCP administrators indicated that in-person instruction remains the gold standard, they recognized that technology helped mitigate the pandemic’s effects on instructional delivery. They also reflected on the future of technology in education programing in prisons and the benefits and challenges it poses moving forward.

Conclusions

This study addressed four research questions. In Table 9, we reproduce those questions, along with summary answers. The rest of this section elaborates on those answers.

Effects of COVID-19 on Instructional Delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed education programs in prison, not only in the short term but also in the long term, and continues to negatively affect instructional quality. The 2022 survey of state correctional education directors documented the immediate effects of COVID-19 on instructional delivery, including halting or suspending in-person instruction across program types (ABE, ASE, CTE, and college programs) in the first year of the pandemic, and instruction was still halted in one or more prison facilities for all program types in early 2022. Furthermore, state directors commented that, as of late 2023, instruction continued to be interrupted in prison facilities as new outbreaks of COVID-19 occur. As a result, state correctional education directors noted that access to education and training programs was negatively affected by COVID-19 outbreaks.

Future of Technology Access

Despite barriers to the use of technology in education that continue to exist, the state correctional education directors who participated in the 2023 focus groups said that the pandemic shifted the mindset toward technology. We highlight here three comments that reflect a common view of the state directors. One state director described the mindset shift as follows:

The one thing that COVID did for [our state] is it actually started the conversations for IT. Some of the conversations about even approaching internet access for our population . . . upper administration would shut it down immediately. We’re not going there, it’s not secure, and now at least they’re having conversations.

Another state director described it similarly:

If you had asked [us] four years ago, would corrections ever allow it? It was a “no,” but because we have the push for innovation and the possibilities are opening up, there’s a lot more like “why not,” “let’s look into that,” “I think we could,” and how that could be more efficient for us and help with student completions.

A third state director agreed; she admitted her own inexperience with technology but said that technology exposure is critical for people who are incarcerated: “If we don’t teach our residents now to understand technology and use technology and the benefit technology, we’re doing a huge disservice.”

In addition, SCP administrators who participated in the 2023 survey indicated that they would like to use technology more to support their prison-based college programs. One administrator wants to “expand the use of tablets and learning platforms to include online textbooks.” Another administrator wants more access to “library materials and possibly pre-loaded tablets that can be brought into the students’ housing units.”

an offline environment, and it has limitations. They’ve resisted until, really, here’s what we found, the colleges and facilities that made greater gains toward their targets were the ones that were using the highest number of laptops.
among incarcerated individuals and correctional staff, and access continued to be negatively affected as late as 2023. On the other hand, the SCP administrator responses from the 2023 survey indicated that that situation has mostly returned to normal.

COVID-19 negatively affected instructional quality early on in the pandemic. Ninety percent of state correctional education directors who responded to our 2022 survey reported short- or long-term gaps in instruction and an inability to administer assessments (e.g., high school equivalency tests, industry-recognized certification exams, academic placement tests).

In 2023, discussions with state correctional education directors also highlighted problems in ramping programs back up and that long-term problems were affecting their ability to do so. These problems included a shortage of instructors, negative effects on staff and student morale, and shortages of correctional officers.

A real concern was that as a result of the pandemic, prison systems now have incarcerated individuals being released quickly without high school credentials or access to education programs in general. State correctional education directors reported that they had to refocus on identifying those who were about to be released and assessing what could be done to help them immediately. In addition, the fact that individuals were being released without high school credentials underscored the importance of reentry services to help link these individuals to services out in the community. In a sobering statement, one state director explained that the state’s three-year education strategic plan was thrown out the window as a result of COVID-19. Now, given the reality of the situation, directors are focusing on ensuring individuals have received at least secondary education before they are released. Our findings suggest there is a recognition by state directors that many students may have to finish their education programs out in the community.

Our findings also suggest that correctional educators, policymakers, and researchers need to revisit how prisons provide a continuum of education opportunities for individuals while they are incarcerated and options for when they return to the community.
Our findings, too, raise a concern about the cohort of individuals who were released from prison during COVID-19, who may have been poorly prepared for reentry having received far less education programming than they would have prior to the pandemic. Some state correctional education directors expect that they will continue to have people leave prisons who have not finished their education programs or who have gotten beyond GED preparation but have not taken the exam. Thus, this trend of releasing students who have not completed their education programs may continue. Future research will need to focus on what the implications are for these students and how to better serve them moving forward.

**Role of Technology**

Our study findings suggest that one of the most-lasting changes as a result of the pandemic is the move toward using education technology and hybrid learning that dramatically changes how we think about providing college and other education programs in prison. This perspective was reflected in the findings from our surveys of state correctional education directors and SCP college administrators, as well as from our focus group discussions and interviews with state directors.

The pandemic clearly accelerated the adoption of technology in education for this population. The adoption of technology represents an opportunity but also raises some concerns that need to be addressed. The pandemic helped spur conversations between correctional administrators, correctional education directors, and educators about the role of technology for incarcerated students, and several state directors stated that it set them on a path toward the expanded adoption of hybrid learning and online learning.

Although we did not examine this specific issue, other research on the U.S. general population has found that sustainable online learning has significantly exacerbated the achievement gap for racial/ethnic minority students (Goldberg, 2021; Waldron, 2023). State correctional education directors expressed similar concerns about the effects of online learning on incarcerated students who have basic skills, who are focused on earning their GEDs, and/or who have limited prior experience with computers. The directors stated strongly that these students would be disadvantaged by virtual learning and that these students would benefit from face-to-face instruction even more than other students.

The role of technology and the training that instructors will require in order to provide online learning and dual modalities is an area that merits further examination. It is worth noting that this trend is not just affecting education programs in prison: It is part of a larger trend affecting colleges and universities that the pandemic helped to accelerate.

**Implications for College Education Programs in Prison**

In today’s economy, having a college education is necessary to compete for many jobs, according to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevel, Smith, and Strohl, 2013), and two-thirds of job postings require some level of college education (Davis and Linton, 2021). The SCP Experimental Sites Initiative has been an important catalyst for expanding access to college programs for incarcerated individuals, and the implementation of Pell Restoration has been hailed as a major advancement for incarcerated students and their access to PSE opportunities.

Focus groups and interviews with state correctional education directors and education staff highlighted that, with Pell Restoration and a growing interest by some state legislatures to expand offerings to include four-year college programs, the potential for expanding college programs in prison is now a reality. Several state correctional systems are being approached by a variety of colleges that are interested in providing college programs in prison in light of Pell Restoration.

However, the experiences of state correctional education directors with the SCP Experimental Sites Initiative and COVID-19 taught them some cautionary lessons as well. Several state directors commented that ensuring that colleges had the full support of their institution’s leadership and funding for these programs was essential to implementing successful college programs in prison that could provide a pathway to a degree or certificate. Several state directors commented on the high administrative burden of
working with individual colleges and that education institutions varied in their levels of readiness and commitment to implement these programs. In addition, the administrative costs of these programs can be high and are not covered by Pell Grants. As one state correctional education director noted, publicly funded universities and colleges tend to have their funding lined up for their college programs in prison. Private colleges, however, tend to rely more on philanthropy for program funding, which leaves an unmet need to ensure the long-term funding of these programs.

We expected to find that the shortage of correctional officers would be an ongoing barrier to implementing in-prison education programs and expanding instruction. Although 83 percent of state correctional education directors reported that correctional officer shortages affected students’ access to education and training programs during the initial waves of the pandemic in 2020, only a few SCP administrators cited such shortages as a limitation.11 Regardless, this staffing issue is a long-term problem that correctional systems will need to address and that will likely continue to affect their capacity to ramp college programs back up and expand other education programming.

This report presents the early and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on prison education programs. We will know in time whether prison education systems will recover completely. We do, however, identify some bright spots, such as the adoption of technology and preparation for similar events in the future, if the United States goes into a pandemic lockdown again.

Notes

1 States also implemented a variety of expedited procedures to release incarcerated persons during this period. However, Carson, Nadel, and Gaes’s (2022) analyses showed that prison releases increased at a much lower rate than the decline in admissions, which suggests that expedited release was not as important a factor in the decline in prison population size during the first year of the pandemic.

2 There were 15 focus group participants and seven individual interviewees. We invited the state directors and their staff to participate in the in-person focus groups as part of the CEA’s 2023 Annual Conference and Training Event. We then conducted individual interviews with those who were unable to participate in the focus groups. The 22 participants represent ten different states.

3 This overview is largely taken from our 2023 report (Davis et al., 2023).

4 Although 67 colleges were initially selected, just 63 colleges from the first cohort remained in the Experimental Sites Initiative through the second round of college selection (ED, 2020). Prior to the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 that President Bill Clinton signed into law, those who had been incarcerated in prison were eligible to receive Pell Grants to help cover the costs of participating in college programs. Pell Grants were a key source of PSE funding for incarcerated individuals. However, in 1994, Congress amended the Higher Education Act of 1965 to eliminate Pell Grant eligibility for students incarcerated in federal and state prisons (Crayton and Neusteter, 2008).

5 Individuals with a death sentence or a sentence of life without parole were not eligible to participate in the SCP Experimental Sites Initiative.

6 At the same time, individual colleges may provide in-person college programs within those same states.

7 Survey instructions were as follows: “All of the following questions refer to those colleges that comprise your Second Chance Pell (SCP) program. If one college, as you answer the survey, please think about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on that college’s SCP program. If you are answering the survey for multiple colleges, please think about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 overall on these colleges.”

8 Focus group discussions with state correctional education directors and staff noted that the decision of whether to resume in-person college programs is largely being made facility by facility.

9 In Table 4.3, the survey result from 11 respondents indicating that the pandemic enabled the expansion of course offerings is somewhat misleading. In the written comments by these survey respondents, only one noted that “[the pandemic] has also allowed us to offer some courses that might have had to be canceled if they were offered in person, which let us offer a wider variety of courses to the students.” The other respondents’ written comments described ways in which the pandemic negatively affected course offerings.

10 Pell Grants can only be used to pay for tuition, fees, books, and supplies required by an individual’s education program (ED, 2015).

11 Although the shortage of correctional officers is an issue that existed prior to the pandemic, the pandemic likely further exacerbated this shortage for a variety of reasons, including COVID-19 outbreaks among staff and incarcerated persons, vaccination requirements of correctional staff, tough working conditions, and poor officer morale (Montgomery, 2022).
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About This Report

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic continues to have profound effects on U.S. society. However, one group of Americans that is often forgotten in the public health debate and that is especially vulnerable to the spread of the virus and its adverse consequences is the 1.2 million incarcerated adults in U.S. federal and state prisons (Carson, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on rehabilitative programs, including education programs, that are provided in state prison systems. State and federal correctional systems implemented a variety of policies to prevent or contain the spread of COVID-19 within this population. As part of this response, many correctional systems ceased or substantially cut back on programming starting in 2020; this included shutting down ongoing education and workforce training programs, as well as other programs and activities, and preventing instructors and other staff from entering prison facilities (Carson, 2021; Carson, Nadel, and Gaes, 2022).

This report provides our findings on how COVID-19 has affected prison education programs within state correctional systems from 2020 through 2023. RAND received funding from the Ascendium Education Group to undertake such an assessment. To do this, we partnered with RTI International and the Correctional Education Association (CEA). We also partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice on the survey of Second Chance Pell (SCP) colleges. Our overall goal was to collect critical information to help inform educators, colleges, corrections officials, and policymakers about the magnitude of the pandemic’s overall impact and its effects on access to prison education programs.

Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of RAND that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.