

Before being eliminated Pell Grants were a major and necessary part of prison education. Do you think Pell Grants should be reestablished as a means of continuing advanced educational opportunities for inmates?

It is assumed that Pell Grants were once a necessary part of prison education. The fact of the matter is they were only necessary because the majority of inmates struggle to rise above the poverty line. Without the grants, the inmates would not be able to afford such an education.

History and statistics show that Iowa has a disproportionate number of African American inmates. In other words, the correctional facilities are densely populated with blacks although the state is sparsely populated with people of color. As many of them are from low income housing, it is inevitable that financial assistance is required to pursue many educational opportunities.

The question should not be whether Pell Grants should be reestablished but what can we do to correct this inequality? Wealthy individuals are less likely to be incarcerated as they are able to afford court costs and attorney fees. Posting a high bond is also less of an obstacle. Crime is not exclusive to any tax bracket or demographic. It is committed across the social spectrum yet the prisons are filled with individuals who were forced to settle for a public defender.

Earlier this year, a progressive ruling was issued in Ferguson, Missouri which dismissed warrants for unpaid fines and legal fees. Such a decision was made because national attention in Ferguson revealed that a transparent amount of racial profiling had occurred. Furthermore, a "stop and frisk" attitude among law enforcement (whether an official policy or not) only feeds the machine of ignorance and hostility that ends in America housing more prisoners than any other nation on earth.

President Obama recently pardoned nearly fifty federal prisoners who were serving time for non-violent drug offenses. The majority of prisoners, whether state or federal are incarcerated for non-violent crimes. This includes many marijuana based charges. However, even if all of the federal prisoners in the United States were to be pardoned, this would be merely a dent in the problem of mass incarceration. There are currently 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States. A little more than 200,000 of them are in federal custody.

Another issue is that in decades past, many mental institutions across the country have been closed down. Prisons have become warehouses for the mentally ill. It is clear that the vast majority of inmates were at a huge disadvantage before their incarceration even began. I believe that offering educational opportunities to people *before* their arrests would muffle the downward spiral of crime and punishment. To take a cue from a current presidential candidate, **all Americans should have the opportunity for a free college education.** Not only would this make us more competent as citizens, a college resume would open up more job opportunities for individuals who may have otherwise turned to crime.

I do *not* believe that the return of Pell Grants would significantly lower the recidivism rate. Education is a must but it should be offered to all communities, especially in areas with a high concentration of at risk youth. Perhaps education reform is in order as well although that would be the subject for another essay. America is falling behind other nations. Hispanics are the fastest growing culture in the United States yet the majority of American students are not fluent in Spanish as a second language. The salaries of school teachers should be much higher as well. A look at our government's budget reveals that education is not a priority on the pie chart. This needs to change before we are to see any meaningful change in the so called Department of Corrections.