



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

Interested but Ineligible: What's Really Blocking Pell Grant Access in Prisons

Key Takeaways

- Among people surveyed in Pennsylvania prisons, only 3.8 percent met all the requirements to qualify for a Second Chance Pell Grant, despite most individuals expressing interest in enrolling in college classes.
- Most people who were ineligible had three or more overlapping barriers, so changing just one rule would not have made them eligible.
- Even if every policy change the researchers studied were implemented at once, eligibility would only rise to about 23 percent, showing that no single change can solve the problem.

Why This Matters

The Second Chance Pell (SCP) pilot program restored federal financial aid for college classes in prison, ending a 22-year ban. Lawmakers and advocates expected demand to be high and assumed that most prisoners who wanted to enroll could use the aid. However, three years into the program, fewer than half of the available Pell Grants nationwide had been used. Researchers wanted to understand why so many grants were going unused despite strong interest in college participation.

Earlier research focused largely on whether prison education helps reduce reoffending, rather than on who qualifies for the funding. One prior study estimated that more than one-third of the national prison population would likely be Pell-eligible, but that estimate relied on limited data and only two proxy measures (age and sentence type) rather than the full eligibility rules. Additional research on the broader Free Application for Federal Student Aid process found that the paperwork itself is long and complicated, which can discourage people from finishing their applications even when they qualify.

This study fills that gap by using detailed survey and prison record data from Pennsylvania to measure, criterion by criterion, exactly how many people meet every Pell eligibility requirement.

How the Study Worked

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections mailed a paper survey to a random sample of 2,715 incarcerated people during a 2018 SCP recruitment period. The survey asked about factors that prison records do not typically track, such as selective service registration and past student loan defaults. After accounting for surveys that were not returned or were left blank, 1,020 people responded. Researchers then matched each survey to the respondent's official prison records, which included information on criminal history, misconduct, education levels, and demographics. Together, these data provided researchers with a complete picture of whether each person met all federal and state eligibility rules for Pell Grants, not just the rules that show up in standard prison databases.

Rather than reporting only one overall eligibility number, the researchers compared eligibility across each individual requirement (such as having a high school diploma, being registered for selective service, or having an acceptable test score) to identify exactly where people were being screened out. This approach is more useful than a simple yes-or-no eligibility count because it shows which specific rules are blocking access and how often multiple barriers overlap for the same person, pointing directly to where policy changes could have the biggest positive effect.

What Was Learned

- **Selective service registration was the single biggest barrier.** More than two-thirds of male respondents (68 percent) had not registered for selective service, which is required for federal aid. This finding was even higher (73 percent) among men who said they were interested in college programs.
- **Low test scores were the top state-level barrier.** Nearly 64 percent of respondents had a basic skills test score below the minimum level that Pennsylvania requires for college coursework, which disqualified them under state rules separate from federal rules.
- **Barriers rarely occurred alone.** Eighty-five percent of respondents had more than one disqualifying barrier, and 56.7 percent had three or more, meaning clearing one obstacle usually was not enough to become eligible.
- **Even eligible-seeming applicants can be turned away during verification.** Incarcerated applicants were far more likely than typical applicants to be flagged for extra document checks, and nearly half lacked valid government identification needed to complete that process.

What This Means in Practice

Low Pell Grant usage in prisons is not primarily a sign of low interest. It is the result of strict, overlapping eligibility rules that disqualify most incarcerated people before they can apply. Programs relying heavily on Pell funding to operate may struggle to fill seats, not because people do not want to attend, but because very few can clear every eligibility hurdle at once. The article points to one practical, low-cost step correctional agencies can take on their own: registering eligible 18- to 25-year-olds for selective service at or near intake. The authors estimate that this measure alone would remove that barrier for about one-quarter of that age group and could be implemented locally without federal action.

The authors also identify a second lever that depends on outside agencies. If the US Department of Education issued guidance clarifying that a status letter plus a self-signed statement is enough to clear a missed selective service registration, schools with strict documentation requirements would have a clear basis to accept it. The authors estimate this single change could roughly double *prima facie* eligibility. Beyond selective service, the authors point to state-level criteria—specifically the restrictions tied to sex offense convictions and distance from a minimum release date—as rules correctional agencies could revisit without federal involvement. Each change affects only a small share of the population on its own but contributes to the larger pattern of compounding barriers. The authors caution that not all barriers should be removed. They specifically note that minimum test score requirements may serve a legitimate purpose in ensuring participants are academically prepared, so this article is not a case for eliminating every obstacle but for targeting the ones that do not serve a clear programmatic purpose.

Source article

Tahamont, S., Hyatt, J., Pheasant, M., Lafferty, J., Bell, N., & Sheets, M. (2022). Ineligible anyway: Evidence on the barriers to Pell eligibility for prisoners in the Second Chance Pell pilot program in Pennsylvania prisons. *Justice Quarterly*, 39(2), 402–426.

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