

Commentary:

For prisoners, Pell Grants are key to college, jobs



A 2014 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that 67.8 percent of former prison inmates are rearrested within three years of their release, 76.6 percent within five years. (Brian Vander Brug / Los Angeles Times 2005)

By Ron Berler

Should Rob Garite have been eligible for a Pell Grant?

Garite was 15 years old on the night in November 1991 he and four teenage toughs lured a 17-year-old Chicago gang member and coke dealer to a remote field in rural Wauconda Township, in northern Illinois. Their intent was robbery. Garite and the elder two of his confederates — one 18, the other 19 — had planned to steal the man's cocaine at gunpoint, sell it, heist a car and drive to Florida. Garite had had a history of arrests, and so had the other older boys.

Their robbery attempt went awry. Tensions rose, and Garite shot the dealer once in the head, killing him. The boys buried the body in the field, about 200 feet from where Garite and the two older teens — all three had left home, dropped out of school and passed their days drinking, stealing and drugging — had pitched a tent that served as their occasional home.

For three years the murder remained unsolved, the body undiscovered. Then in 1994, one of the older boys was arrested on a fresh charge and, in the hope of gaining a reduced sentence, rolled over on Garite. By then, Garite was a divorced father with a ninth-grade education and no plans to return to school. He had a predilection for substance abuse and fighting, and he held a minimum-wage job at a KFC. He was sentenced to 40 years for murder and sent to prison. In August 2014, after serving 20 years, Garite was paroled. How likely is it that an ex-con like him — a violent felon who entered prison with little education — will make it on the street? And at what price to the rest of us?

Until his release, Garite was one of the approximately 2.2 million men and women who populate America's prisons. At some point in their lives, more than 95 percent — including the vast majority of those convicted of violent crimes — will re-enter society. Their success will

require both a profound change in character and the ability to find and keep employment that pays a livable wage. The odds are against them — and us. According to the [U.S. Department of Justice](#), on average, 590,400 prisoners are paroled or released annually. A 2014 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that 67.8 percent are rearrested within three years of their release, 76.6 percent within five years. About 60 percent — roughly 318,000 each year — return to prison.



"Just landing a job, it's a lot harder than I thought it would be," Garite said by phone from his mother's home in Carpentersville, where he now lives. "The kids coming out of college and applying for jobs, they're young, they haven't been to jail, they pose no risk. Who's a company going to look to hire — them or me?"

The best chance to break the recidivism cycle, a 2013 Rand Corp. study commissioned by the Justice Department found, is by offering prisoners access to a college-level education. According to the study, those who took college-equivalency classes of any type while incarcerated were 43 percent less likely to relapse. Yet currently, fewer than 50 of the roughly 1,800 state and federal U.S. prisons offer such a program. This is a relatively new phenomenon. As recently as 1993, according to a

Government Accountability Office report, 22,993 prisoners in 42 states were Pell Grant recipients. Then in 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which included a provision that denies Pell Grants to prisoners. (Some legislators feared prisoners were being awarded federal scholarship money at the expense of nonprisoners. According to the GAO report, this was untrue.) Lacking funding, most prisons shuttered their higher-education, credit-bearing programs. The 45 or so that remain today depend primarily on foundations and private donors for operating costs.

If Garite succeeds outside of prison, it will be due in large part to Rebecca Ginsburg, a [University of Illinois](#) associate professor of education policy who saw the potential for prisoner education while volunteering as an instructor at San Quentin State Prison when she was a graduate student at Berkeley in 1997. Ginsburg is co-founder and director of the Education Justice Project, a prisoner-education advocacy organization affiliated with the University of Illinois. Through it, she administers a college-in-prison program at Danville Correctional Center, a medium-security, central Illinois facility that houses more than 1,800 adult male felons, 18 percent of whom were convicted of murder. Currently, it is one of seven U.S. prisons to offer credit-bearing courses beyond the community college level. Enrollment averages 75 students per year.

The classes — taught by University of Illinois professors and graduate students — range in subject from Shakespeare to South African history to an introductory course in robotics and environmental sustainability. Last year the [Loyola University Chicago](#) academic periodical, *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, published a peer-vetted paper on the impact of higher education opportunities in prisons. Its authors were five Education Justice Project students and Erin Castro, a [University of Utah](#) assistant professor of higher education

in the school's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy. The recidivism rate among the 61 justice project students who thus far have been released or paroled is 8 percent.

Garite, now 39, was one of the justice project's inaugural students. Like many of those serving long sentences, he shed the mix of rage, depression, confusion and self-pity that initially consumed him. Like some, he determined to make use of his remaining prison time. He ceased doing drugs, stopped fighting and eventually resumed his neglected education. While interred at Joliet Correctional Center he earned his GED — a degree program offered by every Illinois state prison — and later completed an associate arts degree in Western Illinois Correctional Center through a program administered by MacMurray College. In 2008, six years after having transferred to Danville, he spotted a prison poster advertising Ginsburg's program (the only such one among Illinois' 27 state prisons). "I wasn't sure I was smart enough for the University of Illinois," he said. Eventually he registered and took classes in business, finance and Shakespeare, among other subjects.

Sarah Lubienski, a U. of I. professor of curriculum and instruction who has taught four years for DCC, was one of Garite's instructors. "He took my statistics class," she said. "For one of his projects, he interviewed EJP volunteers on outsiders' opinions of incarcerated people, and of their job prospects once they got out. He was very hopeful he'd be able to find work, but he could also see in the data that it would be difficult. He asked good questions and showed great mathematical skills. I gave him an 'A.'"

The state gave Garite \$10, a pair of jeans and a T-shirt when he left prison. Still, he re-entered society with a better chance for reconfiguring his life than most. He lives rent-free at his mother's home. He found

employment as a sales manager at his brother-in-law's general contracting firm.

But the work turned out to be seasonal, and with the coming of winter he must find another job. For a while he attended Elgin Community College, completing courses in macroeconomics, statistics and principles of management, receiving A's in all. He had hoped to earn enough business major-related credits to transfer to the University of Illinois' main campus in Urbana-Champaign. But that no longer seems possible. He ran out of money and was forced to withdraw.

Soon Garite will have to start repaying a \$1,700 student loan. There are auto insurance premiums, monthly phone bills and groceries to pay for. Lately he has been working part time for \$15 an hour, installing floors. He earns barely enough to get by, let alone afford college.

"I had great hopes for Rob — that he would get out, get a college degree, go to graduate school and really make a contribution in whatever field he chose," said Lubienski, who wrote him a glowing letter of recommendation for his college applications.

Last May, U.S. Rep. [Danny Davis](#), D-Ill., and five House colleagues introduced a bill to restore Pell Grant eligibility to prisoners not serving life, or death, sentences, enabling prisons to reinstate — and expand — their credit-bearing college programs. It never reached the House floor. Davis said they'll try again.

"Nothing has more impact on my district than unemployment," said Davis, who represents a primarily low-income Chicago district. "People don't understand that for many (former prisoners), punishment lasts a lifetime. They come out of prison and can't get a job. The best protection against recidivism is a job." A Pell Grant, he noted, currently is worth up to \$5,775 annually in federal scholarship funds. On average, according

to the Vera Institute of Justice, it costs taxpayers \$31,286 a year to house, feed and care for a single prisoner.

Garite still holds out hope for college. His present goal is to save enough money to enroll in the University of Illinois at Springfield's online degree program.

"I've always been optimistic," Garite said. "Until the 15th (of the month), when the bills come due and I don't know how I'm going to do it. I think with a bachelor's degree things would be way different for me."

Ron Berler is the author of "Raising the Curve: A Year Inside One of America's 45,000 Failing Public Schools."

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