



John Howard Association of Illinois

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6/17/19 Colorado College Liberal Arts in Correctional Facilities Initiative Conference

The John Howard Association of Illinois (JHA) is the state's sole prison watchdog. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent organization that provides citizen monitoring of correctional facilities, policies, and practices and works to advance reforms needed to achieve a fair, humane and effective criminal justice system. JHA staff and volunteers regularly visit all of our state's adult and juvenile correctional facilities, and receive and respond to privileged (confidential) mail from people incarcerated in Illinois. We also maintain open lines of communication with other parties interested in custodial conditions, including loved ones, correctional staff, legislators, volunteers, and other concerned citizens. We believe transparency and accountability, which are achieved through independent oversight, are necessary for upholding human rights and achieving meaningful, sustained reforms. Our work ranges from front end reforms to reduce the number of people in state custody and long terms of incarceration, to improving conditions of confinement, to back end reforms, such as advocating for increased sentencing credit to allow reductions in length of stay and increased reentry support for those leaving prison. Understanding the realities of how prisons operate and the impact they have on not just the people who live and work in them, but on the larger public in terms of community safety and best use of limited financial resources, is critical to making our system truly rehabilitative. We work to make stakeholders, advocates and decision-makers aware of issues and recommend action to achieve more equitable outcomes. Critical in our role as advocates is supporting, raising awareness of, and reducing barriers to effective programs, such as prison postsecondary education.

Educational access within prisons must be expanded. In Illinois, we have evidence that Correctional Post-Secondary Education has a \$38.75 return on investment on every dollar for the State.¹ Given this figure, it would stand to reason that the public and lawmakers would embrace education in prisons as a cost-saving investment of State funds; unfortunately, this is not the case. As a result, we rely on and celebrate volunteer-facilitated programs to supplement or reinstate college classes for incarcerated students, given that state budget issues and other politics have resulted in extremely limited state-funded opportunity.

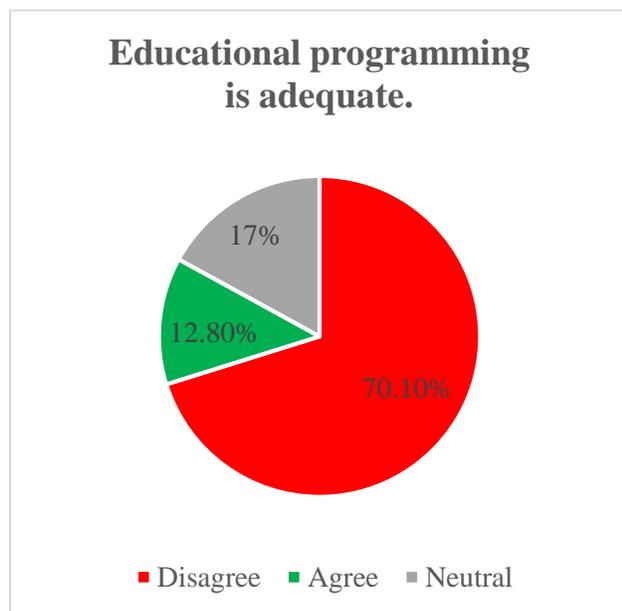
Despite evidence of the effectiveness of education, prison-provided educational programming remains inaccessible to too many in custody. Often opportunities are not equal, as at times they are limited to facilities located near urban centers, limited to individuals housed in lower-security facilities, or even to individuals favored by administrators. In Illinois, for example, a 19-year-old who is in custody of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (where youth may remain up until age 21) has a court-mandated right to be in school six hours every weekday and cannot be confined, while a 19-year-old in adult prisons of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) may be locked in a cell 23+ hours a day. Illinois' adult prisons in Fiscal Year 2018 had waitlists of nearly 5,000 people for pre-college programs provided by the state. Heartbreakingly, about 3,000 of these individuals were waiting to participate in Adult Basic Education, and many of them are mandated to take these classes because of scoring at less than a sixth-grade equivalency during intake testing, which is only administered to about a fourth of the people admitted annually. While there are some reasons for not testing everyone that make sense, such as length of stay being too short for program participation, we have concerns that low literacy is likely regularly not identified, while people who are incarcerated are frequently required to read things to understand and conform to their environment as well as to be made aware of their rights. Of the approximately 41,000 people who came through IDOC intake in Fiscal Year 2018, only about 13,000 were tested, and about 40% of those people scored below a

¹ See *2017 Budgeting For Results Commission Report*, <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/budget/Pages/results.aspx>.

sixth-grade level.² Perversely, some people report they fail these tests in the hopes of getting to participate in a class and get out of their cell, or to have an opportunity to earn sentencing credits to reduce the length of their incarceration. This is coupled with an understanding of lack of opportunity to advance their education to a postsecondary level in custody. People should instead be encouraged to excel in their education with more postsecondary opportunities available. We would also recommend increasing use of peer literacy tutors.

In addition to the limited number of spaces in classes, many people who would like to participate are barred because of their sentence or status. Unfortunately, people’s ongoing court dates, medical or mental health conditions, disabilities that cannot be accommodated, or disciplinary issues or investigations will at times result in them losing a chance to participate. Some people who lack outside support must work prison jobs to afford hygiene or stamps and cannot take classes because their work hours conflict with school times. Some others in school report they lose the opportunity to exercise or use the phone to call their family because these things occur at the same times as classes. Prisons also commonly struggle to recruit and retain educators at all levels. Another barrier within IDOC is that people are largely now prioritized on school waitlists by their outdates, meaning that often a person must have under two years left to serve before they can get into a class. Hence, a juvenile who may have received an adult sentence of many years may be practically barred from school given this sort of rule.

We have ample evidence that people want more educational opportunity in our prisons. Since 2016, JHA



implemented surveys to capture greater input from incarcerated people on our prison visits. In 2018, more than 70% of the over 9,500 incarcerated respondents to JHA’s surveys reported educational programming was inadequate. Further many chose to comment indicating that lack of educational opportunity was one of the issues that was most impactful for them. As one man wrote in a 2019 JHA survey comment: “There are some people who don't want to go to school or programs, and they force them, and there are people with a lot of time—40 or 50 years or life—who yes, we want to go to school or programs, and they don't give us the opportunity because of the time that we have and I feel that it isn't fair, if tomorrow I were to return to court and win my case and leave, because of the time I had and the time I was in prison, they never gave me the opportunity for some kind of rehabilitation. I say this based on my experience.

I've applied for school and programs and because of my time they don't talk to me, they don't give me the opportunity of “rehabilitation.” I hope that in the future this changes so that all of us here have an equal rehabilitation.” *Translated from Spanish.*

JHA will continue to use additional data and insights gained from our survey results and oversight work to advocate for effective programming, to increase rehabilitative opportunities, and to reduce costs of incarceration for individuals, governments, and communities. We look forward to learning more about your work and sharing experiences and expertise, in the hopes of collectively working towards a more just world.

² While corrections officials do track these figures, they do not make them regularly publicly available. JHA advocates for increased data visibility to gain appropriate political support for resourcing increased programming.