

California Prison Programs and Reentry Pathways

After taking on a rehabilitative mission in 2005, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) began expanding education, employment, and rehabilitative programs. In 2012, CDCR set an ambitious goal to meet the rehabilitative needs of 70 percent of eligible people.

By 2019, prison program capacity had greatly expanded, but most people released from prisons had not participated. In a PPIC study of prisoners released between 2015 and 2019, four in ten had participated in any program. Furthermore, most people assessed to need programs did not participate, and some without assessed needs did.

How did CDCR work to raise participation in prison programs?

Whether people can participate in programs depends on program availability at each prison. By 2019, programs that could be made available everywhere were. Rehabilitative programs and *Transitions*, a job readiness program, expanded across prisons. Community colleges gradually added courses, which supplemented existing primary and secondary education classes. Career technical education (CTE) programs were offered in prisons with facilities to accommodate them—none were available in all prisons.

Participation also depends on program capacity. Slots allocated to rehabilitative and employment programs more than tripled—from enough to serve 8 percent of the prison population in 2015 to 30 percent in 2019. Slots for substance use disorder treatment rose 124 percent; anger management and criminal thinking programs grew more than 150 percent; and family and relationships programs slots more than doubled. Slots for education grew 9 percent as CDCR hired over 200 new academic and vocational instructors.

Do the people who need prison programs participate in them?

Most people who need programs do not participate. On average, 68 percent of people were assessed to need substance use disorder treatment—and 15 percent participated. About 40 percent needed a program to address criminal thinking and 47 percent needed anger management; 10 percent participated in either program. Twenty-five percent of prisoners were assessed to need family and relationships programs, and 6 percent entered a program. Though 41 percent had assessed employment needs, 9 percent participated in any CTE program and 19 percent participated in *Transitions*.

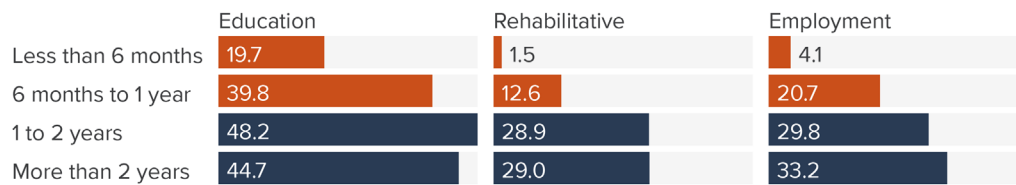
Between 28 percent and 42 percent who tested into education programs participated in them. On average, people entering prison tested into primary education with eighth-grade level reading scores and sixth- to seventh-grade level math skills. About four in ten who first tested into primary education ever took adult basic education classes, but fewer than three in ten who tested at the high school level took a GED course.

What factors may affect whether people participate in prison programs?

Beyond availability and capacity, the time people spend in prison can influence whether they participate. Between 2015 and 2019, average prison terms lengthened by seven months—from just under to just over five years. Yet 40 percent of people spent one year or less in prison. Those who served less than six months were least likely to participate in programs—and may have had limited access; even those serving up to one year participated less than those who served longer.

People who spend less time in prison are less likely to participate in programs

Program participation by time served and program area



Source: Author calculation from CDCR administrative data.

Notes: N = 185, 310. Education programs presented in this figure include primary and secondary GP and VED, but do not include college. Rehabilitative programs include all core and specialized programs. Employment programs include CTE and *Transitions*.

What were the recidivism rates for prisoners after release?

Although PPIC has not yet evaluated whether prison programs affect recidivism, we describe key outcomes as California expanded prison programs. For those released between 2015 and 2019, average two-year reconviction rates fell about 7 percentage points relative to 2012. However, lower arrests and convictions during the pandemic may explain part of this change: 64 percent of people released in 2015 were rearrested within two years and 38 percent were reconvicted compared to 56 percent rearrested and 30 percent reconvicted after leaving prison in 2019.

Most recidivism was related to drug and drug paraphernalia possession—which changed little between 2015 and 2019. Within two years after prison, at least 45 percent were rearrested for supervision violations (30%) or drug possession (at least 15%), while 10 percent were reconvicted for any drug offense, and about 8 percent for possession.

People who had served prison time before were more likely to recidivate than those who had not. Within two years, 69 percent of those with prior prison histories were rearrested, compared to 55 percent of those without—with 42 percent and 32 percent, respectively, reconvicted. People with prior prison histories were also less likely to participate in most programs than those without prison histories—but more likely to participate in substance use disorder treatment (57% vs. 43%).

What other areas may need to be addressed or enhanced through prison programs?

Families may benefit from interventions that address violent behavior in those who return home; at least 7 percent of people released between 2015 and 2019 had been imprisoned for domestic assault. On another front, substance abuse may pose the greatest obstacle to successful reentry—a threat that has likely grown amid the opioid and fentanyl crisis. Ensuring broader access to substance use disorder treatment should be a priority. Challenges to broadening access to programs range from scheduling conflicts to short prison terms; future research can identify ways to overcome these challenges and improve program participation in prison and during reentry.

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Sources: Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [California Prison Programs and Reentry Pathways](#), by Heather Harris, Brandon Martin, and Sean Cremin.