

**USC** Race and  
Equity Center

**HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE  
FORMERLY INCARCERATED  
INDIVIDUALS TO PURSUE  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
AS OPPOSED TO  
BEING DIRECTED INTO  
CUSTOMARY LABOR  
MARKETS?**

**Eric Gentry**

***Supporting Justice-  
System Impacted  
Students***

February 2023

# BIOGRAPHY



## **Eric Gentry (He/Him/His)**

### ***RISE Program Manager***

Eric Gentry is a middle child of seven, growing up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood in Vallejo, CA, in a Hispanic/Indigenous family. After dropping out of conventional high school he would soon become acquainted with the carceral system, spending seven years incarcerated, most of which in a Level IV facility. At 25 years old, and two felony convictions, Eric was ready for change as a first-generation college student.

Chabot College provided Eric with a second chance and the Umoja program provided the pseudo family needed to connect to the campus. After a year of college completed, Eric returned to his hometown and graduated from Solano Community College with High Honors, where he was the 2014 Commencement Speaker. Eric transferred to Cal State University, East Bay, and in 2017 graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. Currently Eric is pursuing a Master of Social Work degree at Arizona State University, where he maintains a 4.0 GPA and looks forward to graduating class of 2023.

Since undergraduate school, Eric has provided innovative social services to Oakland's homeless veteran population. In 2019, Eric co-founded the SOAR Program at Solano Community College, supporting their formerly incarcerated students. Eric actively mentors inside Solano County Juvenile Hall, working one-on-one with gang youth and motivationally speaks inside several local jails, prisons and events. Currently, Eric is the RISE Program Manager at Chabot College's, providing critical support to their formerly incarcerated students. Eric Gentry has successfully overcome adversity and recidivism by rising to the occasion and soaring over the challenges.

Eric enjoys time with his wife, three-year-old and eight-month-old daughters. Eric is passionate about classic cars as he is completing several projects with father and brothers, as well as amateur photography in nature with his two Pitbull's. Eric's work has been highlighted on televised news, articles, and magazine publications multiple times as he devotes his time to giving back to his community.



# CURRENT INCARCERATION FIGURES





An estimated 19 million individuals in the United States are impacted by felony convictions (Flurry, 2017). Currently, nearly 2 million people are incarcerated in juvenile correctional facilities, jails, prison, immigration detention facilities, and state psychiatric hospitals in the United States (Wagner & Sawyer, 2022). Of the 2 million, about 55 percent are Black and Brown people (Carson & Anderson, 2016). Most incarcerated communities have release dates and return home with inadequate rehabilitation.



# POST-RELEASE FROM PRISON

Many, myself included, return home after years of incarceration with no career or college training. Incarcerated in high-security California prisons from age 18 to 25, I experienced the reality of minimal rehabilitation. The Department of Corrections offers minimal resources, especially in respect to adequate educational opportunities. These resources become even less likely in the higher security facilities I resided in. Facilities that offer vocational and educational services do not provide them to every incarcerated individual. My only college experience during that time was





correspondence classes paid for by family on the outside, a burden I feared, as prison is expensive enough for impacted families. Once released, I was ordered to attend a P.A.C.T (Parole and Community Together) meeting, essentially a resource fair for post-incarceration. No local colleges were present at this meeting. Instead, I witnessed my post-incarcerated peers—who already live on the fringes of society—being pushed to pursue low-wage, laborious and often hazardous jobs that lack union protection. These included day labor jobs with construction companies, warehouse positions, and truck driving opportunities if they were approved by parole officers. Formerly incarcerated construction workers are pushed into non-union jobs with low pay and little to no benefits. To augment their income, many resort to second jobs (Wang & Bertram, 2022). All individuals should have the opportunity to explore other career paths that result in career longevity, without being funneled into laborious career paths they are not passionate about.

When I came home, I was not interested in being a day laborer and thought working within a warehouse was the better option. My first job was in downtown San Francisco at a high-end retailer warehouse. My job was to sift through soiled designer clothing from around the world, looking for hidden treasures to be resold at a fraction of retail. The warehouse was old and dusty, and the doors were locked behind us until it was time for mandatory breaks and lunch. As I got to know my coworkers, all Black and Brown, I discovered that they *all* had experiences of incarceration. Instead of shedding the shackles of prison, I connected to my peers with shared stories of the institutions that imprisoned us behind a new set of locked doors.

# COLLEGE REENTRY PROGRAMS AT CHABOT COLLEGE

The Rising Scholars Network at Chabot College encourages our formerly incarcerated scholars to aim for the academic pathway, as opposed to creating another CTE (Career & Technical Education) machine. As the R.I.S.E Program Manager at Chabot College, I make it my mission to encourage our formerly incarcerated scholars to pursue their career passions and interests. According to statistics, formerly incarcerated students in university reentry programs have a 3% recidivism rate, with more than 90% of them completing their degrees (Smart Justice, 2022). Our mission is to assist formerly incarcerated students in completing their educational goals while becoming productive members of society. We encourage our students' completion of transferable degrees to 4-year universities, preferably with supportive programs for formerly incarcerated students. Examples of these 4-year university, supportive programs include Underground Scholars within the University of California system and Project Rebound in the California State University system.

My goal is to ensure our students do not share the experience I had while attempting to navigate college academia without a support program. I did not know where to start the process of enrollment or what financial aid was. As a first-generation, reentry college student, I would have been lost if not for my then girlfriend, now wife, encouraging me to seek higher education. She was a student at California State University, East Bay and completed the entire enrollment process for me. She was my enrollment specialist, financial aid advisor, and academic counselor. But not all individuals have this natural support, which is why programs supporting formerly incarcerated students are vital.

# PROJECT REBOUND AT THE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Project Rebound was started by Professor John Irwin in 1967 as a mechanism to matriculate students into San Francisco State University directly from the justice system (San Francisco State, 2022). This project recognized the need to support students with conviction histories, ensuring successful transition from incarceration to graduation at universities. Project Rebound is now at 15 of the 23 California State University campus, with designated academic and financial counselors, peer mentors, and career coaches (Project Rebound,

2022). More recently, a similar program was born at University of California, Berkeley: Underground Scholars Initiative. Underground Scholars was started in the Spring of 2013 by

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formerly incarcerated students at UC Berkeley as the Underground Scholars Initiative (USI), a student organization (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2022). These programs offer safe spaces for transferring, formerly incarcerated students to feel welcomed in these prestigious institutions and peer mentorships which guide students to campus and community resources. These programs offer similar familial support to students transferring from the Rising Scholars Network and operate like a beacon on University of California and California State Universities.

# REDUCING RECIDIVISM THROUGH DIVERSION

Our current methods of incarceration and punishment are proven to be ineffective. The stigma of conviction histories creates barriers to successful transitions to society. But studies continue to show that with more education completed, recidivism lessens, in some cases diminishing. California is taking significant steps to ensure currently, and formerly incarcerated individuals have equitable access to higher education. Prison education programs lower recidivism among incarcerated individuals by 48% compared to those who do not, and as they complete more advanced degrees of education, the likelihood of recidivism declines (Yoon, 2019). However, mostly designated facilities and lower-level yards have access to these vessels for higher education (i.e., college courses and collegial support staff). With our over-use of prisons and in effort to reduce recidivism amongst the very high percentage of incarcerated people with release dates, all those interested should be offered access to college while incarcerated. Diverting individuals from court to community college programs will save taxpayers money, while reducing recidivism and combating mass incarceration. A 2018 study found that diversion programs were successful in reducing the likelihood of conviction and recidivism in participating individuals (Rempel, et.al., 2018). Sending individuals to college to explore career choices is more cost-effective than incarceration. In the State of California, it costs far more to incarcerated individuals in prison that it does to fully pay their college tuition. The average cost of housing an incarcerated individuals in California is around \$106,000 annually (California Legislature's, 2022). In contrast, the annual cost of attendance at University of California, Berkeley, is about \$38,000 for students' living in a campus residence hall (Berkeley, 2022). College is the cost-effective solution to recidivism, with the goal of connecting formerly incarcerated students to their passions and careers of their choice.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

As individuals, we can do our part to encourage career exploration when communicating with formerly incarcerated students. Those impacted by the justice system have been conditioned that the labor market is the best option when returning to society. People discuss how they will become welders or enter a trades union once released from prison, not due to passion but the potential pay rate. According to California's Best Practices: Pathways from Prison to College, academic and career counselors should be made available to formerly incarcerated students so they can assess their transcripts, create detailed educational plans, and offer guidance on academic majors, professional areas, and transfer options (Murillo, et al., 2022). Formerly incarcerated student should be encouraged to meet with a counselor to explore education options and highlight potential barriers to certain careers. These students should be informed of transfer opportunities to universities, connected to support programs like the Underground Scholars and Project Rebound, and shown that there are more educational opportunities than Career and Technical Training. It is as simple as having a conversation with a formerly incarcerated student and guiding them to a college counselor to find their passion and purpose on campus.



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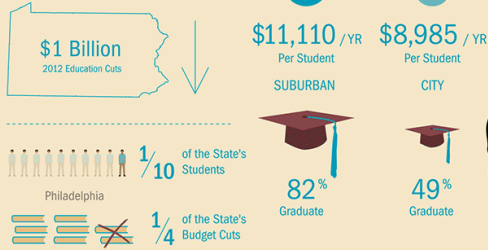
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# EDUCATE

# INCARCERATE

## Education Funding

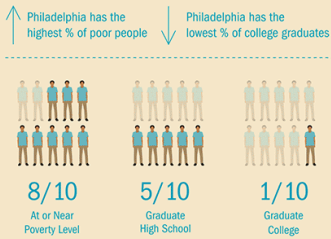


PA is ranked 43rd of 50 in educational funding equality among income levels.

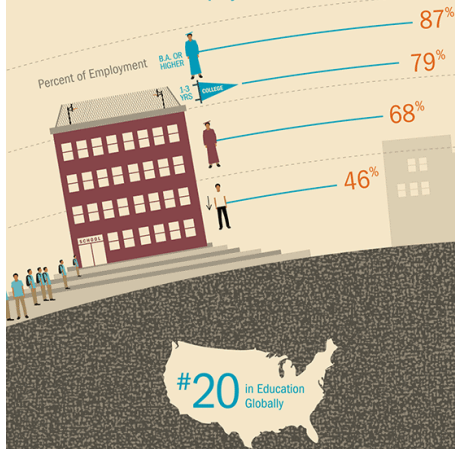
PA is one of the worst funders of education, second only to Nebraska.

## Philadelphia Poverty and Education

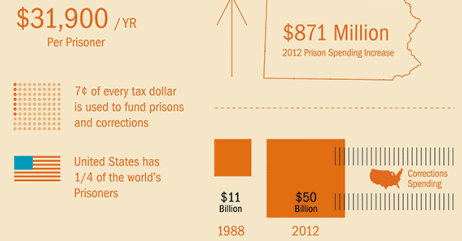
Compared to the Nation's Largest Cities



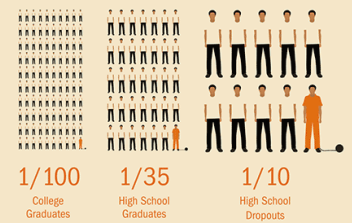
## US Education and Employment



## Corrections Funding



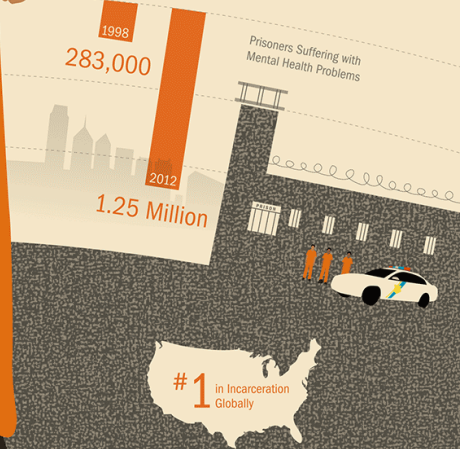
## US Education and Incarceration



## US Incarceration Demographics

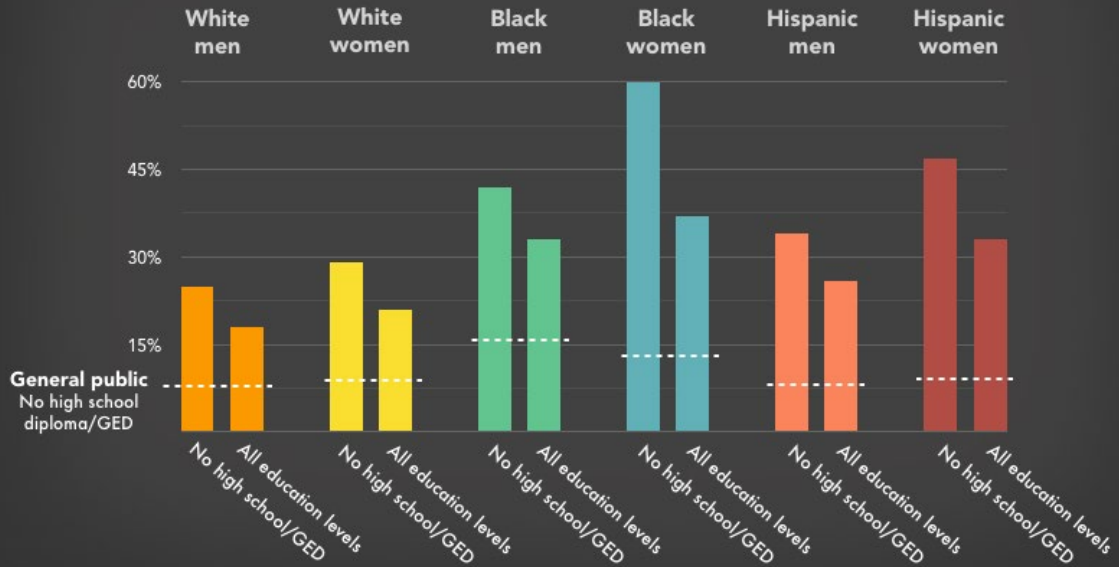


## US Incarceration and Mental Illness



## Educational exclusion raises unemployment rates of formerly incarcerated people

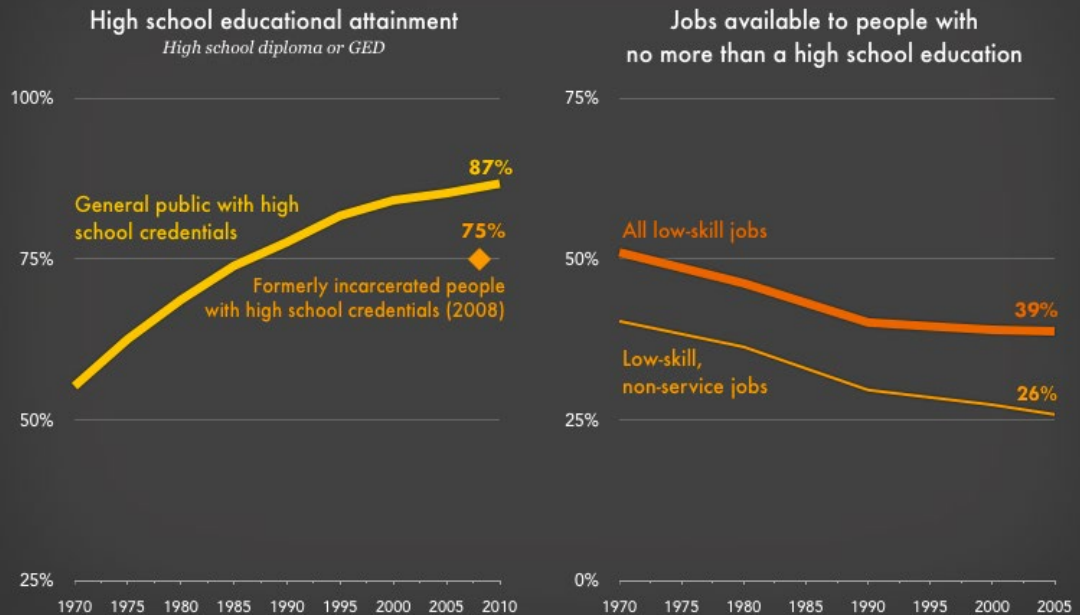
Unemployment rates of formerly incarcerated people by race/ethnicity, sex, and education level, compared to the same groups in the general public (shown as white dotted lines), 2008.



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Sources & data notes: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html#methodology>

## It's getting harder for formerly incarcerated people to compete in an increasingly skilled labor market



Sources & data notes: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/education.html>

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