

OPINION

Technology and education: A crucial combination in addressing California's recidivism crisis



This Aug. 17, 2011 file photo shows a correctional officer in one of the housing units at Pelican Bay State Prison near Crescent City, California.



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Numbers tell the story of California's staggering recidivism challenge. According to the most recent data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 44 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals are convicted of a crime within three years of their release.

While California shows modest success helping incarcerated individuals return home compared to more daunting national figures, where 82 percent of the formerly incarcerated [reenter the correctional system within 10 years of release](#), the takeaway is clear. We need a greater focus and a better approach to address the recidivism challenge to improve community outcomes.

There is good news. Solutions are in plain sight. One of the simplest ways to ensure people convicted of a criminal offense are able to successfully return and thrive in their communities is by securing stable employment. Recidivism decreases significantly when a person finds a job. Why? Having a job creates both the ability to earn income and stability to provide a sense of purpose. Research tells us that education is the biggest predictor of finding a job quickly after reentry so the path seems clear.

Today, [one in five Californians](#) living on the streets arrived there almost directly from a correctional facility. Not surprisingly the leading cause for becoming unhoused is lack of stable employment. According to a study conducted by the Rand Corporation, incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education (either academic or vocational) were 43 percent less likely to reoffend. What's more, those who participated in job training had nearly 30 percent greater odds of obtaining post-release employment.

As the number of individuals [released](#) from California prisons grows each year, the case for offering secure tablets across the state's correctional facilities to give incarcerated individuals access to media and educational content gets stronger.

While state funding decreases, public-private partnerships and [individual providers](#) are finding new ways to deploy secure tablets to improve outcomes, while also investing in free educational offerings, so incarcerated individuals can work toward a degree or an industry recognized credential.

With much more information at their fingertips, incarcerated Californians have more opportunity than ever before to become productive, self-reliant community members. That self-reliance benefits the whole community, given [California spends almost \\$106,000 per incarcerated individual](#), per year.

Connecting incarcerated individuals with access to technology, such as tablets, jumpstarts the education they need to prepare to enter the workforce when coming home. Ongoing access to dedicated education, training, and coaching resources significantly increases their odds of securing a quality job post-release.

Lantern, the largest U.S.-based learning management system and digital education platform that currently reaches over 150,000 incarcerated individuals, offers access to more than 1,600 free college degree programs. Educational programs like Lantern help incarcerated individuals prepare for the [nearly 150 million](#) tech jobs expected to emerge by 2025, while providing a viable solution for the country's growing labor shortage.

There are other workforce development approaches that are working throughout the country and should serve as case studies for states like California to better address the recidivism crisis. Just north of California, in Washington, access to [computer-based vocational programs](#) have proven advantageous in giving a formerly incarcerated individual the training needed to become a Google software engineer post-release. In Arizona, organizations like [Arouet Foundation](#) are connecting private sector employers with people with felony convictions to promote fair chance hiring with the goal of increasing economic opportunity to improve communities and reduce recidivism.

We know reducing recidivism requires “outside the box” solutions to help solve a generational challenge. As people in prison approach their release, it is too late to start focusing on the education they need to successfully reenter until they return home. Technology should be a force multiplier that connects individuals with the education they need to prepare for reentry from the first day their time inside begins.

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