

Social Justice nomination

For the category of social justice coverage, EdSource is delighted to nominate some of our stories and podcasts about college education for prison inmates and its results after release from incarceration. The first pieces here were skillfully reported and written by staff writer Ashley Smith. They provide both a wide sweep of programs across the state and an up-close look at students. The work details the expansion, funding and difficulties facing the widening array of bachelor's degree programs in California prisons. Smith explains how the Cal State and UC systems overcame bureaucratic hurdles to offer more bachelor's degrees to incarcerated people, regardless of their chances of being released. They show how an unusual program in San Quentin Prison allows inmates to transfer from a two-year college to a state university.

Smith faced difficulties, encountering resistance from some prison officials and visits canceled due to Covid-19. Some families and victims were hesitant or unwilling to share their experiences. However, Smith found a growing interest in educating incarcerated people, especially since evolving laws would eventually lead to more releases. She explored multiple studies showing that higher education greatly reduces recidivism rates. The article and the resulting podcast combine deep policy reporting on a controversial social justice issue with profiles of people not usually thought of as students.

The related piece is about how college education for prison inmates had a result after release from 30 years of incarceration. The piece, skillfully reported and beautifully written by staff writer Betty Marquez Rosales, provides an up-close look at one of the students who turned his life around with in-prison classes. Rosales profiled Patrick Acuña, who spent 30 years in prison and was in the first cohort of incarcerated students in a University of California bachelor's program. Now, after release, he is living and studying at the regular UC Irvine campus. Rosales interviewed him at length and obtained his parole records. She researched his upbringing, his conviction for being a look-out during a gang murder, his original sentence of life without parole, its reversal and his challenges in studying in prison. His dramatic personal change and a deep commitment to education struck a largely positive chord with readers but some also protested about allowing prisoners to access college. The story reached over 157,000 pageviews, nearly 90 story comments, 300 likes on Instagram, and was carried by newsletters, including NYT California Today. The podcast version and the embedded video were popular too.

Together, this work at EdSource deserves strong consideration in the social justice category.

<https://edsource.org/2023/students-earn-college-degrees-in-expanded-california-prison-program/696358>

<https://edsource.org/podcast/bachelors-degrees-in-prison-promise-incarcerated-students-a-second-chance>

<https://edsource.org/2023/after-30-years-in-state-prison-he-starts-new-life-at-uc-irvine/697962>