

Measuring Equitable Expansion

SUNY has a unique mission as New York’s statewide university system, to “provide the people of New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population...”¹ That mission extends directly to carceral spaces, where SUNY’s Office of Higher Education in Prison (OHEP) and SUNY institutions throughout the state are tasked with expanding access while maintaining the excellence of the SUNY system’s higher education in prison (HEP) programs. OHEP’s Longitudinal Data System (LDS) provides the foundation for accountability in pursuit of that goal. It makes patterns visible across facilities and campuses, enabling cross-site learning and targeted improvement. The analysis to follow leverages data from the LDS to assess our progress in expanding higher education access throughout the New York State prison system while ensuring equity.

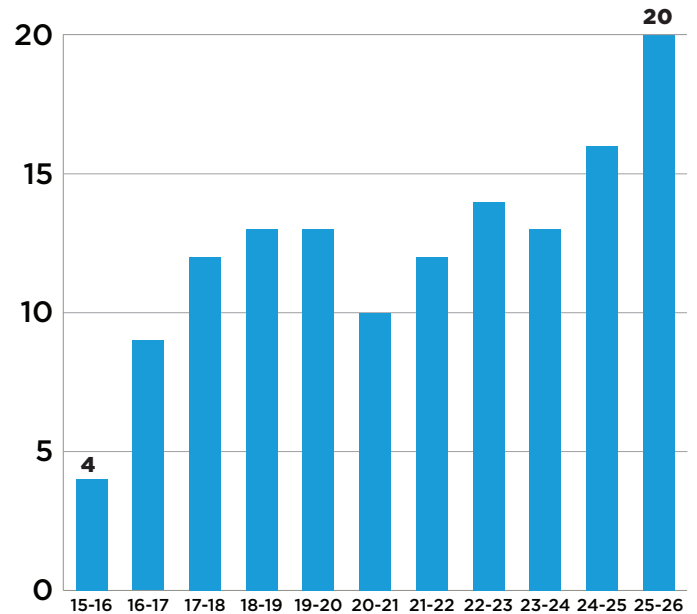
ASSESSING THE NEED FOR EXPANSION

In November 2025, HEP programs in New York served approximately 1,159 students across 24 facilities, just 3.4% of the total incarcerated population at that time.² While that figure represents dramatic expansion in access even prior to the Second Chance Pell initiative in 2016, it also demonstrates an urgent need for continued expansion in the state’s HEP offerings. In the Fall 2025 semester, more than half (62%, 724 students) of the incarcerated college students across New York were enrolled in SUNY programs. This underscores SUNY’s lead role expanding access, alongside the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), which aims to double enrollment in college programs statewide by 2030.³ With 64 campuses across New York, many located near state correctional facilities, SUNY is uniquely positioned to partner with DOCCS to advance this goal.

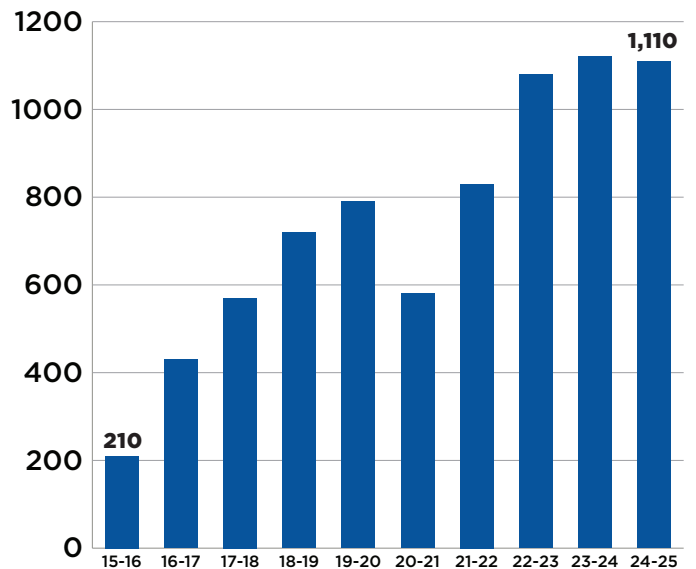
1 New York Education Law § 351 (State university mission). <https://newyork.public.law/laws/n.y.education.law.section.351>.

2 New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. *DOCCS Fact Sheet*. December 2025. <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2025/12/doccs-fact-sheet-december-2025.pdf>.

3 New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. *DOCCS Announces New York State’s Commitment to Join Council of State Governments Justice Center Reentry 2030 Initiative*. July 15, 2024. <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/07/7.15.24.reentry-2030-press-release.pdf>.



SUNY COLLEGES WITH HEP PROGRAMS



SUNY STUDENTS WITHIN NEW YORK PRISONS

SUNY has grown its HEP enrollment rapidly since 2015, serving more than five times as many students in 2025 as in 2015. But meeting the state's goal of doubling HEP enrollment by 2030 will require growth beyond what SUNY can accomplish on its own. This underscores the need for SUNY to play a centralized role, not only as a provider, but as a statewide coordinator, driving expansion across the higher education landscape, including public and private institutions and nonprofit partners, to achieve this statewide goal.

MEASURING EQUITY IN EXPANSION

In alignment with SUNY's mission to ensure equitable access to higher education opportunities for all demographic groups, the LDS tracks disparities in the current student body. SUNY OHEP uses demographics of the overall incarcerated population in SUNY-served facilities as a benchmark for comparison.⁴

In comparing across variables such as age, race, sentence length, and county of commitment, SUNY HEP participants are proportionally representative of the larger incarcerated population in the facilities where SUNY runs college programs, with a few notable exceptions:

- **AGE: SUNY HEP students are skewed towards younger age groups**, most noticeably in the 30-34 and 35-39 age groups. Together, these two age groups represent roughly 42% of SUNY HEP students, compared with 32% of the general incarcerated population in state prison facilities with SUNY college programs. Conversely, individuals over the age of 49 are slightly underrepresented in SUNY HEP students (16% vs. 23%).
- **SENTENCE LENGTH:** In academic year 2024-2025, **the largest share of SUNY HEP students had aggregate minimum sentence length of 3-10 years** (57%), compared with 41% of the general incarcerated population in SUNY-served facilities. By contrast, 6% of SUNY HEP students had an aggregate minimum sentence between 1.5-3 years, compared with 15% of the incarcerated population in SUNY-served facilities.
- **RACE:** SUNY HEP students are proportionally representative across most racial groups; however, **Hispanic individuals are underrepresented by approximately seven percentage points** (17% of SUNY HEP students), while **White individuals are overrepresented by about six percentage points** (29%), relative to the overall incarcerated population in SUNY-served state prison facilities.
- **REGION OF COMMITMENT:** Using county of commitment as a proxy for students' pre-incarceration location, we find that **the second largest share of incarcerated SUNY students come from New York City** (31%). New York City is the most common region of commitment among the overall incarcerated population in facilities served by SUNY programs (36%).

This type of cross-institutional, facility-level demographic analysis is only possible because SUNY has centralized data across all of its HEP programs. While these disparities may serve as useful signals pointing to opportunities for continued improvement through system-level interventions, the overall picture suggests SUNY is making progress on its goal to serve the full diversity of incarcerated New Yorkers. Without systems-level data, SUNY HEP programs could expand in ways that overlook key demographic groups, undermining the mission of equitable access even as overall enrollment increases.

In some cases, where demographic disparities exist, they may reflect more broadly shared characteristics of those who are most likely to pursue higher education in prison, rather than inequities in access. For example, the underrepresentation of older individuals highlights that current programming selects for individuals with visible reentry goals. A key benefit of SUNY's continued expansion and its LDS is the ability to track how this selection bias shifts over time, revealing where structural barriers remain even as overall access increases. For truly equitable access, SUNY HEP programs must address barriers to entry for these underrepresented groups.

⁴ New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. Incarcerated Profile Report. January 2026. <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2026/01/2026.01.01-uc-profile.pdf>.

	SUNY HEP STUDENTS	GENERAL INCARCERATED POPULATION
AGE GROUP		
18-24	6%	8%
25-29	13%	13%
30-34	22%	16%
35-39	20%	16%
40-49	24%	24%
50-64	14%	18%
65+	1%	4%
SENTENCE LENGTH		
LESS THAN 1.5 YEARS	0%	3%
1.5-3 YEARS	6%	15%
3-10 YEARS	57%	41%
10-20 YEARS	17%	20%
20 YEARS OR MORE	19%	20%
LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE	1%	1%
RACE CATEGORY		
BLACK	50%	49%
HISPANIC	17%	24%
WHITE	29%	23%
OTHER RACIAL GROUPS*	5%	4%
REGION		
NYC	31%	36%
UPSTATE URBAN	33%	31%
UPSTATE OTHER	28%	23%
SUBURBAN	9%	10%

* Native American, Asian, and Other race populations are combined into the "Other racial groups" category due to small population sizes.

Note: Percentages are rounded and do not sum to 100 in all cases.

MEASURING STUDENT SUCCESS

SUNY's systems approach ensures expansion is guided by equity, which is measured by data centralized within OHEP's LDS. To deepen our understanding of SUNY HEP programs, we must apply this systems-level lens to student outcomes, evaluating academic progress and degree completion rates to ensure expansion upholds rigorous quality standards. The next research brief in this series will analyze SUNY's commitment to excellence in outcomes for incarcerated students.