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EDITORIALS

Cutting College Aid, and Fostering Crime

One of the most irrational initiatives in the war on crime was a decision by Congress in the 1990's to cut off some ex-offenders from federal education aid. It's highly unlikely that anyone has been deterred from lawbreaking as a result. But if people who have paid their debts to society and are seeking new starts are denied education aid, they could well be locked out of the new economy and sent right back through the revolving door into prison.

Congress is revisiting a particularly onerous law under which tens of thousands of students have been turned down for federal grants and loans because of drug offenses, some of them minor and as much as a decade old. A proposed change in the law would improve the picture slightly. It is aimed at penalizing students who commit drug-related crimes while receiving federal aid. It would be better to repeal the provision entirely, as many observers have suggested.

Law enforcement officials have learned over

and over again that ex-offenders who get an education and find jobs are far less likely to end up back behind bars. Barring former offenders from school aid makes it virtually impossible for them to get the necessary schooling for joining the mainstream. The law has a disproportionate impact on poor and minority communities, where the drug trade is rampant and young men often have run-ins with the law before they get their lives on track.

By narrowing access to affordable education, the federal government further diminishes the prospects of young people who are already at risk of becoming lifetime burdens to society. Members of Congress are understandably hesitant to cast votes that might brand them as being "soft on crime." But it doesn't take a genius to see that barring young minority offenders from college leads to more crime—not less. Student aid was never intended for use as a law enforcement weapon. Any attempt to employ it that way will inevitably yield perverse and unfair results.