

# PAVING THE WAY HOME

An Evaluation of the  
Returning Citizens  
Stimulus Program

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Jed Teres  
Rachel Sander

September 2021

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



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# Overview

Each year in the United States, about 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons, and millions more are released from local jails. These men and women—known as “returning citizens”—face a tough transition to the community. Often with few financial resources, they must address their day-to-day needs of food, clothing, and housing; obtain identification and access to medical care; and endeavor to find employment and reconnect with family. For those released in 2020 and early 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic made the transition even more difficult. Yet federal emergency relief funds may have done little to help them, since they may not have had access to the funds if they lacked recent work histories or tax returns.

In April 2020, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO—a nonprofit organization that provides services to returning citizens, also known as “reentry services”) launched the Returning Citizens Stimulus program (RCS) in an effort to fill this gap. RCS was a cash transfer program that offered financial support to returning citizens during the critical period just after their release. Participants were eligible for three monthly payments totaling up to \$2,750 if they reached milestones such as preparing résumés.

CEO, with funding from Blue Meridian Partners on behalf of the Justice and Mobility Fund, engaged MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the RCS program. The study found the following:

- RCS was launched on a large scale with almost no time for planning. Nevertheless, the program operated relatively smoothly overall, a notable achievement, particularly in the context of the pandemic.
- A large majority of RCS participants reached the required milestones and received three payments. This fact means that most participants were connected to employment and financial support services as a result of the program’s milestone structure.
- Participants reported that the RCS program helped them feel some level of financial stability in the period following incarceration. Most said that they spent the RCS funds on essential expenses such as rent, groceries, and clothing, and on personal care to prepare themselves for employment.

The findings presented in this report suggest that RCS may provide a promising model for smoothing reentry from incarceration, and that more research is warranted. The program was implemented well and on a large scale very quickly, with individuals enrolled in large numbers and in varied contexts.



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The Authors



## Executive Summary

Each year in the United States, about 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons,<sup>1</sup> and millions more are released from local jails.<sup>2</sup> When incarceration ends, the men and women who are released—known as “returning citizens”—face a tough transition to the community.<sup>3</sup> Often with few financial resources, they must address their day-to-day needs of food, clothing, and housing, obtain identification and access to medical care, and endeavor to find employment and reconnect with family.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties facing those released in 2020 and early 2021, yet requirements for recent work histories or tax returns may have prevented some recently incarcerated people from gaining access to federal emergency relief funds.

In April 2020, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO—a nonprofit organization that provides services to returning citizens, also known as “reentry services”) launched the Returning Citizens Stimulus program (RCS) in an effort to fill this gap. RCS was a cash transfer program that offered financial support to returning citizens during the critical period just after their release. Participants were eligible for three monthly payments totaling up to \$2,750 if they reached milestones such as preparing résumés. The RCS program began as a way of providing emergency cash assistance to CEO clients but was quickly expanded through partnerships with 32 other reentry organizations. It was implemented in 28 cities and provided over \$24 million in support to more than 10,000 returning citizens before it ended in April 2021.

CEO, with funding from Blue Meridian Partners on behalf of the Justice and Mobility Fund, engaged MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the RCS program using a mixed-methods approach. This report presents results from an analysis of the program’s implementation and describes the reentry experiences and outcomes of participants in the five months after enrollment. These analyses rely on program records, in-depth interviews with participants and staff, and participant surveys conducted approximately two and five months after enrollment in RCS. A second report, scheduled for early 2022, will present findings from an analysis of the impacts of RCS on criminal justice outcomes such as reincarceration. While the evaluation focuses on the implementation of RCS in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings are relevant more broadly, as the program represents a potential model for assisting returning citizens during the difficult reentry period even after the pandemic has subsided.

The study found the following:

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<sup>1</sup>Carson (2020).

<sup>2</sup>There are about 10 million releases from jail each year, including some individuals who were released multiple times or who were transferred to prison. This total is calculated using data provided in Zeng and Minton (2021).

<sup>3</sup>Western (2018).

<sup>4</sup>La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, and Halberstadt (2008).

- RCS was launched on a large scale with almost no time for planning. Nevertheless, the program operated relatively smoothly overall, a notable achievement, particularly in the context of the pandemic.
- A large majority of RCS participants reached the required milestones and received three payments. This fact means that most participants were connected to employment and financial support services as a result of the program’s milestone structure.
- Participants reported that the RCS program helped them feel some level of financial stability in the period following incarceration. Most said that they spent the RCS funds on essential expenses such as rent, groceries, and clothing, and on personal care to prepare themselves for employment.

## **The Experience of Reentry During the Pandemic**

Returning citizens, particularly those who were in prison for many years, go through a difficult and stressful period in the first days and months after release from incarceration.<sup>5</sup> They face an immediate need for money to attend to basic needs, such as finding food, clothing, and stable housing, yet they often leave prison or jail with few personal financial resources.<sup>6</sup> People who are released from incarceration commonly experience housing instability and homelessness as well as difficulty obtaining employment.<sup>7</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the postrelease period for individuals who were released in 2020. Returning citizens faced the stress of COVID-19 itself; incarceration and COVID-19 have disproportionately affected many of the same communities—particularly low-income Black and Hispanic communities.<sup>8</sup> In addition, returning citizens were released during a time of skyrocketing unemployment,<sup>9</sup> which probably affected their ability to find work as well as the amount of support that their families could provide them. Despite these difficulties, federal emergency relief funds may not have reached some returning citizens, whose access to them may have been limited by requirements for recent work histories or tax returns.

## **The Returning Citizens Stimulus Program**

The primary objective of the RCS program was to provide returning citizens with immediate cash assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also connecting them to reentry support. It was designed as a multimonth initiative rather than a one-time relief check to provide participants with support over a stretch of time as they transitioned into their communities and new lives. This

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<sup>5</sup>Western (2018).

<sup>6</sup>Visher, LaVigne, and Travis (2004).

<sup>7</sup>Western (2006); (2018).

<sup>8</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020); Carson (2020); Zeng and Minton (2021).

<sup>9</sup>Parker, Minkin, and Bennett (2020).

design also guaranteed that participants were connected to reentry providers for at least two months. RCS provided short-term financial assistance of up to three monthly payments, totaling up to \$2,250 to \$2,750 per person.<sup>10</sup>

Upon enrolling in the program, RCS participants were issued prepaid cards from a private vendor—“Skylight pay cards”—and their first payments.<sup>11</sup> The second and third payments were issued using the pay cards at 30 and 60 days if clients reached milestones that met their individual needs, which they could select from an approved list. The milestones were different at each reentry organization; they were designed to encourage returning citizens to participate in the programs and pursue their job searches, but also to be fairly attainable. In other words, while the payments were conditional, the conditions were achievable by design.

To qualify for the program, individuals had to be: (1) recently released from incarceration, (2) 18 or older, (3) unemployed or underemployed (working 20 hours or less per week), and (4) not employed by CEO or a partner organization. The program was implemented in 28 locations nationwide, but 95 percent of participants were in seven cities: Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, and Tulsa. Enrollment in RCS began in April 2020; most enrollments were finished by January 2021, but CEO continues to implement RCS as funds become available.

## Research Questions and Data Sources

Soon after the launch of RCS, CEO engaged MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the program. The main objective of the study was to assess the implementation of RCS and to measure the immediate and near-term outcomes of the returning citizens who received RCS payments, in particular their economic outcomes and those related to their overall well-being. The main sample for the study includes individuals who enrolled in RCS in Detroit, New Orleans, and Los Angeles between April and December 2020 and who consented to participate in the research.<sup>12</sup> However, the study examines the background characteristics, completion of milestone tasks, and payments received by participants in 18 of 28 locations where RCS was implemented. Overall, about 72 percent (7,605) of 10,517 RCS enrollees consented to participate in the study.

The data provide information about how the RCS program was implemented, how the payments were used, and what the people who participated in the program experienced. The

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<sup>10</sup>Participants who lived in “high-cost” cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, and New York were eligible to receive \$2,750, as were CEO clients.

<sup>11</sup><https://www.netspend.com/skylightone>.

<sup>12</sup>The RCS program was also implemented in [other cities], but existing data-sharing agreements did not allow CEO to share those data with researchers. The total number of RCS participants, including those in those locations, was 10,517.

evaluation team is also seeking administrative data, which will be included in a later report, so that it can analyze RCS's impacts on criminal justice outcomes such as reincarceration.<sup>13</sup>

## Findings

The RCS program was implemented well, especially considering the limited time available for planning. Reentry partner organizations found that the process for them to enroll RCS participants and for participants to reach milestones aligned well with their existing processes and requirements. CEO's strong partnerships with the reentry service providers facilitated successful program implementation. The implementation findings show that a cash transfer program can be implemented well and on a large scale very quickly. Individuals were enrolled in large numbers in varied contexts and were very likely to receive the payments. CEO was able to start the program quickly and successfully because it had in place the infrastructure to implement a cash transfer program using its existing payment platform, *Skylight*.

- **RCS participants reached their milestones at a high rate, so over 90 percent of them received two or three RCS payments.**

Because so many of them reached their milestones, over 90 percent of participants received two or three payments (see Figure ES.1).<sup>14</sup> In total, participants received an average of \$2,256. The average payment amount was consistent across locations.

- **Almost two-thirds of participants reached an employment-related milestone. Almost a third reached a milestone related to financial security.**

Among the participants who reached employment-related milestones, they most often reached ones related to creating résumés and attending employment workshops.

- **Participants said RCS helped them find, secure, and maintain employment, partly because it was connected to existing reentry employment programs and partly because it gave them money to prepare for working.**

Nearly all participants said that finding employment was a high priority for them once they returned home, and that the employment-related milestones mentioned above helped them in their job searches. In interviews, some participants said that the RCS funds helped them cover transportation costs and acquire professional clothing to prepare for job interviews or for starting their first jobs following incarceration.

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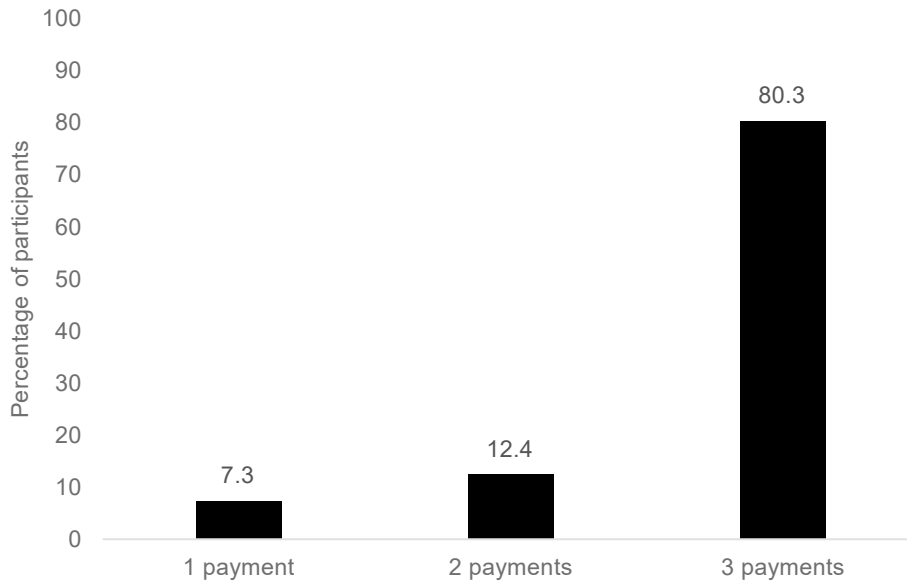
<sup>13</sup>The evaluation team plans to conduct a nonexperimental analysis in which the outcomes of the RCS group will be compared with the outcomes of a comparison group of individuals who were released from incarceration in RCS cities during the same time period, but who did not receive RCS. The comparison group will be constructed using a matching method such as propensity score matching, which will identify comparison group individuals with characteristics similar to those of RCS participants.

<sup>14</sup>All participants automatically received the first payment after enrolling.



**Figure ES.1**

**Percentages of RCS Participants Receiving One, Two, and Three Payments**



SOURCE: CEO management information system.

NOTE: The sample includes 6,508 RCS participants.

- **Participants reported that RCS helped them feel more financially stable and establish themselves in the period following incarceration.**

RCS participants said that the payments provided tremendous financial relief in the period immediately following their release. All of the RCS participants that the study team spoke with said that the money helped them get back on their feet during the transition period. Most RCS participants spent the payments on everyday expenses like housing, transportation, groceries, and bills (see Table ES.1). Still, many participants struggled to cover larger expenses (such as rent) and mounting bills (for example, credit debt) and to find safe, affordable housing and reliable transportation.

## **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this report suggest that the Returning Citizens Stimulus program may provide a promising model for smoothing reentry from incarceration, and that more research is warranted. The program was implemented well and on a large scale very quickly, with individuals enrolled in large numbers and in varied contexts; over 90 percent of participants received two or three payments. Most RCS participants spent the funds to meet the basic needs that returning

**Table ES.1**  
**Uses of RCS Payments**

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
What did you spend RCS money on?		
Food/groceries	61.2	55.2
Regular expenses such as rent, transportation, or utilities	57.7	56.8
Other bills such as credit card or medical bills	22.9	20.8
Savings for some future payment or emergency	22.4	12.5
Things to help child(ren) in school	21.1	17.0
Fines or fees owed to the courts or supervision agencies	18.9	17.0
A treat for oneself or others	15.4	12.2
To help other family members or friends with their expenses	12.6	8.9
A major purchase such as a house, a major appliance, or a car	12.4	0.0
Health or dental care, or health insurance	8.2	5.6
Security deposit for an apartment	7.5	7.4
Childcare or child support payments	7.5	4.7
Sample size	976	665

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021.

citizens commonly face upon reentry, and those who were interviewed felt that the payments relieved some of the stress of this critical period. Some participants used the funds in ways that may position them for longer-term success—for example, by meeting expenses associated with finding a job.

While RCS was offered as emergency aid in the context of a pandemic, even in good economic times, the first days and months after release from incarceration represent a challenging time in which returning citizens often have few financial resources. By addressing immediate financial needs, cash transfers could help returning citizens to focus on longer-term goals and encourage them to participate in other reentry services. More research is warranted on the impacts of cash transfers for this population. The next report from this study will present the results of a nonexperimental analysis of the impacts of RCS on criminal justice outcomes.

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction and Background

The number of people who are incarcerated in the United States is staggering, with about two million people in prison or jail on an average day,<sup>1</sup> representing the highest rate of incarceration in the world.<sup>2</sup> Each year, about 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons,<sup>3</sup> and another 10 million people are admitted to local jails, with the vast majority being released within that year.<sup>4</sup> This enormous system of incarceration does not touch all communities equally. People of color, particularly those living in communities with high rates of poverty, are disproportionately likely to experience incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Studies have found strong evidence of systemic bias in policing and other elements of the criminal justice system in communities across the United States.<sup>6</sup>

When incarceration ends, individuals who are released—known as “returning citizens”—face a tough transition back into the community.<sup>7</sup> Often with few financial resources, they must address their day-to-day needs of food, clothing, and housing; obtain access to medical care; and endeavor to find employment and reconnect with family and friends.<sup>8</sup> Many returning citizens face challenges meeting all these needs, and returns to prison and jail are common.<sup>9</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties facing those released in 2020 and early 2021, yet requirements for recent work histories or tax returns may have prevented some recently incarcerated people from gaining access to federal emergency relief funds.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Maruschak and Minton (2020). Prisons are under state or federal jurisdiction and typically house people who have been convicted of felonies and whose sentences are longer than one year. Jails are under local city or county jurisdiction and typically house people who were convicted of either felonies or misdemeanors and whose sentences are less than one year, as well as individuals who are being held before adjudication (that is, individuals who have not been convicted and are awaiting trial or adjudication of their charges).

<sup>2</sup>Walmsley (2018).

<sup>3</sup>Carson (2020).

<sup>4</sup>Zeng and Minton (2021).

<sup>5</sup>Alexander (2010); Clear (2007); Western (2006).

<sup>6</sup>Alexander (2010); Western (2006).

<sup>7</sup>Western (2018).

<sup>8</sup>La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, and Halberstadt (2008).

<sup>9</sup>Durose, Cooper, and Snyder (2014).

<sup>10</sup>Stimulus checks and extended unemployment insurance were two large, federal emergency relief programs aimed at individuals. People in incarceration and returning citizens were not barred from receiving these funds, but many may not have met the programs' requirements. People could only receive stimulus checks if they filed federal tax returns (see U.S. Internal Revenue Service, 2021), which people in incarceration may not have done if they did not earn enough money to be required to. (People who work in prison typically earn a fraction of the minimum wage. See Evans, 2014.) Similarly, most states require individuals to have worked and earned a threshold amount in four out of the five previous quarters to be eligible for unemployment insurance benefits, including extended relief benefits. See U.S. Department of Labor (2021). People who were incarcerated may not have worked and earned enough to meet those requirements.

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO—a national nonprofit organization that provides services to returning citizens, also known as “reentry services”) launched the Returning Citizens Stimulus (RCS) program in April 2020 in an effort to fill this gap. RCS was a cash transfer program that offered financial assistance directly to returning citizens who participated in reentry services. The money was provided in up to three separate payments totaling up to \$2,250 or \$2,750, depending on the location. CEO launched the RCS program with an investment from the Justice and Mobility Fund, a collaboration of the Ford Foundation and Blue Meridian Partners, with support from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and other philanthropic organizations. CEO partnered with a network of 32 reentry organizations to operate RCS in 28 locations across the United States.

When the RCS program was launched, there were important questions about its feasibility and about how participants would respond to the offer and receipt of financial assistance. For example, would most participants meet the conditions to qualify for payments? How much would participants receive? Could the agencies administering the program get the money into participants’ hands quickly? How would participants use the money, and what role would the assistance play in their reentry experiences?

To answer these and other questions, CEO, with funding from Blue Meridian Partners on behalf of the Justice and Mobility Fund, engaged MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the RCS program. The goals of the evaluation are to assess how well RCS was implemented, and to document how program participants experienced reentry during the pandemic and the extent to which RCS helped. In a later report expected in 2022, the research team also hopes to explore the effects of RCS on returns to incarceration. While the evaluation focuses on the implementation of RCS in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings may be relevant more broadly. The program represents a potential model for assisting returning citizens during reentry, which is challenging even in the absence of a pandemic.

This is the first report from the evaluation. It presents results from an analysis of the program’s implementation and describes the reentry experiences and outcomes of participants in the five months after enrollment. These analyses rely on program-participation and payment data, in-depth interviews with participants and program partner staff members, and surveys of participants conducted approximately two and five months after they enrolled in RCS.

## **The Experience of Reentry**

Returning citizens, particularly those who were in prison for many years, undergo a difficult and stressful period in the first days and months after they are released from incarceration.<sup>11</sup> They face an immediate need for money to attend to basic necessities such as food, clothing, and stable housing. Yet those who are incarcerated are disproportionately likely to have been in poverty before incarceration and often leave prison with very few personal financial resources.<sup>12</sup> Many

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<sup>11</sup>Western (2018).

<sup>12</sup>Visher, LaVigne, and Travis (2004).

are released with only a small amount in “gate money”—typically about \$100, with a high of \$200 in California—from the department of corrections in their state.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, returning citizens may be in a significant amount of debt from criminal fines and court fees, which are assessed at multiple points in the criminal justice process. For example, they may be required to pay fees for detention, court security, the use of a public defender, parole or probation, and other routine aspects of criminal prosecution and supervision.<sup>14</sup> As a result, people may owe thousands of dollars upon release, and failure to pay these debts can result in reincarceration.<sup>15</sup>

People who are released from incarceration also commonly experience housing instability and homelessness. Nationally, people who have been incarcerated recently are more than 10 times as likely to go through homelessness than the general public; housing insecurity (which includes living in temporary housing like a rooming house or motel) is even more common among this population.<sup>16</sup> While returning citizens often live with family members and rely on them for financial help, this reliance can further strain families who may already be struggling financially.<sup>17</sup> Finding other sources of financial support can be difficult. For example, while returning citizens can apply for public benefits, they may face hurdles that slow that application process, such as the need to obtain updated identification cards.<sup>18</sup>

Although returning citizens commonly cite obtaining employment as one of their top goals upon release,<sup>19</sup> they often encounter difficulties finding work and have poor employment outcomes, on average.<sup>20</sup> For example, among the recently released people in three of the four states in the Returning Home Study, only 65 percent were employed at any point in the eight months after they were released, and they averaged three total months of employment during that time. At eight months after they were released, the median total income earned by the sample was only \$700.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in a study of people who were released from prison or jail and then sought employment services, a third did not work at all in the year after they were released.<sup>22</sup>

These employment struggles stem in part from the education and work histories of those who are incarcerated. Returning citizens average low levels of educational attainment; among male prisoners, 40 percent do not have a high school diploma or equivalent and only about 23 percent have attended any college.<sup>23</sup> Many also have short and unstable work histories, with

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<sup>13</sup>La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, and Halberstadt (2008).

<sup>14</sup>Evans (2014).

<sup>15</sup>Evans (2014).

<sup>16</sup>Couloute (2018).

<sup>17</sup>Visher, LaVigne, and Travis (2004); Roman and Travis (2006).

<sup>18</sup>La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, and Halberstadt (2008).

<sup>19</sup>Visher and Kachnowski (2007); Western (2018).

<sup>20</sup>Western (2006).

<sup>21</sup>Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner (2008).

<sup>22</sup>Wiegand, Sussell, Valentine, and Henderson (2015). The statistic given is for the evaluation’s control group.

<sup>23</sup>Ewert and Wildhagen (2011).

periods of unemployment exacerbated by time spent incarcerated.<sup>24</sup> Returning citizens also face severe employer discrimination based on their criminal history, and, for the disproportionate number of African Americans and other people of color who are incarcerated, based on race.<sup>25</sup>

Returning citizens struggle to remain in the community; rates of rearrest and reincarceration are high. Nationally, among those released from prison, close to half are rearrested within the first year. About one-third are returned to prison, either for a new crime or, more often, because of a technical parole violation such as violating a curfew, missing a check-in with a parole officer, or having a positive drug test.<sup>26</sup> Reincarceration rates for those leaving jail are not as well measured, but a study in one Massachusetts county shows a rearrest rate of close to 50 percent within the first year, mirroring the proportion among people released from prison.<sup>27</sup>

## Returning Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the postrelease period for individuals who were released in 2020 and early 2021. Prisons and jails have been the sites of some of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the country.<sup>28</sup> In an effort to reduce overcrowding and the potential for the spread of COVID-19, states and localities released more people in 2020 than they typically do, resulting in a 14 percent drop in the incarcerated population.<sup>29</sup> Release from prison probably reduced the risk of contracting COVID-19 for many people. However, the groups and communities whose people are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated—Black and Hispanic communities and communities with low incomes—are also disproportionately likely to be at high risk of contracting COVID-19 outside of prison or jail.<sup>30</sup> Factors such as homelessness and reliance on mass transportation probably also put returning citizens at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shutdowns and curtailment of economic activity have also made looking for work more difficult. Unemployment rates skyrocketed in 2020, particularly among workers with low incomes and those not employed in white-collar jobs.<sup>31</sup> Finding work in these circumstances was probably extremely difficult for returning citizens. The families and the communities to which individuals were returning may also have been experiencing financial hardship that made it difficult for them to provide support. While incarceration history did not disqualify individuals from receiving federal emergency relief funds, returning citizens may have faced barriers to actually receiving those funds, as discussed above.

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<sup>24</sup>Petersilia (2005); Travis (2005); Western (2006).

<sup>25</sup>Holzer, Rafael, and Stoll (2007); Pager (2003, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>Durose, Cooper, and Snyder (2014).

<sup>27</sup>Lyman and LoBuglio (2006).

<sup>28</sup>Kang-Brown, Montagnet, and Heiss (2021).

<sup>29</sup>Kang-Brown, Montagnet, and Heiss (2021).

<sup>30</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021); Carson (2020); Zeng and Minton (2021).

<sup>31</sup>Parker, Minkin, and Bennett (2020).



## Reentry Policy and Cash Transfer Programs

Policymakers have developed “reentry” programs designed to aid people who are released to the community from prisons and jails. These programs, which are typically run by nonprofit organizations that receive public and private funding, have generally focused on developing job readiness, addressing substance-use issues, providing housing, or improving behavioral health among participants.<sup>32</sup> Others have provided transitional employment opportunities, in which people are provided with temporary, paid employment.<sup>33</sup>

Cash transfer programs, which to date have rarely targeted returning citizens, offer an additional, potentially complementary approach to reentry services. In these programs, participants are provided with direct monetary support, either unconditionally or upon reaching specified milestones or meeting specified requirements. These programs are designed to reduce financial hardship with a series of direct payments, which participants may use as they choose. Cash transfer programs include a range of models, such as conditional cash transfer programs that typically target individuals or families with low incomes, universal basic income programs that are available more broadly, and large, means-tested programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Research has shown that cash transfer programs that broadly target individuals with low incomes can reduce short-term poverty and sometimes have positive effects on health and other outcomes.<sup>34</sup> Encouragingly, these programs generally do not lead to reductions in employment, and in some cases they can serve to increase it. For example, preliminary results from an ongoing basic income demonstration study in Stockton, California are positive, with improvements in financial well-being, mental health, and employment.<sup>35</sup>

It is possible that an infusion of financial support during the stressful postrelease period, when money is especially needed, could help returning citizens sustain themselves and put them on a better trajectory for successful reentry. However, only a few studies have been conducted in this area. A 1970s randomized test of the Transitional Aid Research Project showed that those receiving the payments were less likely to be arrested and obtained higher-paying jobs than control group members, though they took longer to be employed.<sup>36</sup> There is also some evidence that the 1996 ban on food stamp receipt among those with felony convictions led to increases in crime among those affected by the ban, suggesting that access to financial support could lead to reduced rearrests.<sup>37</sup> Finally, a recent analysis of data from the 1970s Manitoba Basic Annual Income Experiment suggests that cash transfers in large amounts may lead to reductions in crime. The program, which provided a guaranteed income of C\$19,500,<sup>38</sup> was associated with decreases in both

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<sup>32</sup>Council of State Governments Justice Center (2021).

<sup>33</sup>Barden et al. (2018); Redcross et al. (2009); Redcross et al. (2010).

<sup>34</sup>Fiszbein et al. (2009); Riccio and Miller (2016); Hasdell (2020); Tan, Adereth, and Balakrishnan (2019).

<sup>35</sup>West, Baker, Samra, and Coltrera (2021).

<sup>36</sup>Rossi, Berk, and Lenihan (1980).

<sup>37</sup>Tuttle (2019).

<sup>38</sup>Since the program was implemented in Manitoba, the cash transfer amount is shown in Canadian dollars.

property and violent crime in the community.<sup>39</sup> It is also important to note that the research thus far has not suggested that giving individuals money leads to *increases* in crime, such as drug-related crime, for example, which may be a concern to policymakers.

This evaluation is designed to continue building evidence in this area by examining the feasibility and operational issues related to implementing a cash transfer program targeting this population, documenting the experiences and responses of returning citizens who receive the funds, and conducting an exploratory analysis of some of the effects of the program.

## **The Returning Citizens Stimulus Program**

In April 2020, CEO launched the Returning Citizens Stimulus program, a cash transfer program designed to provide financial support to returning citizens in cities across the United States during the critical postrelease period. The pandemic presented a unique opportunity to do something that has never been done before on a large scale: implement a direct cash assistance program for recently released individuals. As discussed above, the program launched in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of emergency aid to people who had been released from incarceration, a population that was largely shut out of other forms of pandemic-related government assistance. CEO created partnerships with 32 other social service organizations across the country; those organizations offered the RCS payments to participants in their existing reentry programs.

RCS provided up to three monthly payments to participants, totaling up to \$2,250 to \$2,750 per person. Upon enrolling in the program, RCS participants were issued prepaid cards from a private vendor—“Skylight pay cards”—and their first payments. The second and third payments were issued through the pay card, which functioned much like a debit card. Participants received these payments at 30 and 60 days if they reached milestones related to their individual needs, which they could select from an approved list. The milestones were different at each reentry organization, but were generally related to employment or job readiness (for example, a client might choose to complete a résumé, participate in a job-readiness workshop, or apply for a job). The milestones were designed to encourage people to participate in the programs and to search for jobs, but were deliberately designed to be easily reached. In other words, while the payments were conditional, the conditions were not meant to be difficult to meet because the program’s primary objective was to give participants immediate financial relief during the pandemic.

To qualify for the program, people had to be: (1) recently released from incarceration, (2) 18 or older, (3) unemployed or underemployed (working 20 hours or less per week), and (4) not employed by CEO or a partner organization. The program was implemented in 28 locations nationwide, but 95 percent of participants were in seven cities: Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, and Tulsa. Enrollment in RCS began in April 2020; most enrollments were finished by January 2021, but CEO continues to implement RCS as funds

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<sup>39</sup>Calnitsky and Gonalons-Pons (2021).

become available. In total, 10,517 returning citizens enrolled in the program between April 2020 and March 2021, during the time of this evaluation.

## Study Design and Methods

Concurrent with the launch of RCS, CEO engaged MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the program. The main objective of the study was to examine the implementation of RCS and to measure the immediate and near-term economic outcomes and well-being of the returning citizens who received RCS payments. About 72 percent (7,605) of 10,517 RCS enrollees consented to participate in the study. The study examines background characteristics, milestones reached, and RCS payments for participants in 18 of the 28 locations where RCS was implemented. The study team conducted interviews with staff members from partner organizations in five cities (Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, and Oakland), and conducted in-depth interviews and follow-up surveys with participants in three of those cities (Detroit, Los Angeles, and New Orleans). The study team selected these sites based on the number of participants they had enrolled and their geographic diversity.

The study was designed to address research questions in four areas:

1. **Program implementation:** How were participants enrolled in the program and how did they receive payments? How did programs address operational challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. **Program participation and receipt of payments:** How many payments did participants receive? What milestones did participants reach in order to receive payments? How did participants use the RCS funds?
3. **Reentry experiences and outcomes:** What did participants encounter as they returned to their communities? How did they do finding employment and housing, registering for benefits, and obtaining other sources of income? What role did the RCS program play in their reentry? How did the COVID-19 pandemic shape these experiences?
4. **Effects on criminal justice outcomes:** Is there evidence that RCS reduced returns to incarceration?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>The study team is seeking administrative data on criminal justice outcomes. If it can obtain those data, this fourth research question will be addressed in a second report, scheduled for early 2022. If the data are available, the evaluation team plans to conduct a nonexperimental analysis in which the outcomes of the RCS group will be compared with the outcomes of a comparison group of individuals who were released from incarceration in RCS cities during the same period, but who did not receive RCS. The comparison group will be constructed using a matching method that will identify comparison group individuals with characteristics similar to those of RCS participants.

MDRC is using a mixed-methods approach to the evaluation. The data sources are summarized in Table 1.1 and described further below and in Appendix A.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 1.1**

**Data Sources and Cities**

Data source	Cities	Participants in the Analysis Sample
Intake survey	Colorado Springs, Denver, Detroit, Harrisburg, Los Angeles, Marin County, New Orleans, Oakland, Oklahoma City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San José, Solano County, and Tulsa	6,508 (of the 7,605 who consented to participate in the study)
Milestone and payment data	Same as intake survey	6,508 (of the 7,605 who consented to participate in the study)
Follow-up online surveys at 2 and 5 months	Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Detroit	Completed the 2-month follow-up: 976 (of the 3,199 participants who were invited to take the survey)
		Completed the 5-month follow-up: 665 (of the 2,655 participants who were invited to take the survey)
Participant interviews	Los Angeles, New Orleans, Oakland, and Detroit	Completed both surveys: 452 26
Staff interviews	Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, and Detroit	11

NOTE: Some cities where RCS was implemented are not represented in this table due to contractual or policy restrictions on research.

*Intake survey:* CEO collected demographic and housing-stability information from RCS participants when they enrolled. Baseline data were available for 6,508 of 7,605 people who consented to participate in the study. These data provide information about the characteristics and backgrounds of RCS participants at the point of enrollment.

*Milestone and payment data:* The study team collected records of RCS participants’ completion of milestone tasks and the payments they received. The data show the types of activities that qualified as milestones for RCS payments, as well as the number of payments and total amount of money participants received.

*Follow-up surveys:* MDRC administered two online surveys to RCS participants who enrolled in the program in Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Detroit. The first survey was administered approximately one to two months after enrollment, around the time when participants were

<sup>41</sup>Here, a “mixed-methods approach” means the research team is using both quantitative and qualitative data sources for the analyses.

scheduled to receive their last payments.<sup>42</sup> The second survey was administered approximately five months after enrollment, when they were no longer receiving payments. The surveys included questions about employment, housing, financial stability, the use of RCS payments, legal system fines and fees, and interactions with parole and probation officers. The two-month follow-up survey was completed by 976 of the 3,199 participants who were invited to take it (a 31 percent response rate). The five-month follow up-survey was completed by 665 of the 2,655 participants who were invited to take it (a 25 percent response rate). Four hundred and fifty-two participants completed both surveys. This response rate is fairly typical for online surveys of this type. It is too low to be sure that the survey responses are representative of the RCS population, and the results should be interpreted with caution. However, the findings probably do reflect common experiences in the program and with reentry: Appendix Table A.1 shows that the background characteristics of the survey responders and nonresponders are very similar.

*RCS participant interviews:* The study team conducted semistructured, in-depth phone interviews with a total of 26 RCS participants from 14 different partner organizations in 4 cities.<sup>43</sup> Most of these participants came from partner organizations in Los Angeles. All the participants interviewed had received all three RCS payments and had consented to participate in the study. The interviews provide valuable context about the reentry experiences of RCS participants and information about how the RCS payments and program services may have affected those experiences.

*RCS staff interviews:* To learn about the implementation of the RCS program, MDRC interviewed 11 staff representatives from 7 partner organizations, including 3 staff representatives from CEO, in August and September 2020. The interviewees played crucial roles in helping CEO set up and implement the RCS program. The team spoke with staff members from partner organizations in Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, and Oakland. The interview protocols included questions about program implementation, strategies for addressing operational challenges arising from COVID-19, and staff members' perceptions of the program and their clients' interactions with it.

## Roadmap to the Report

The rest of this report is divided into the following chapters: Chapter 2 describes the RCS participants and discusses the program's implementation. Chapter 3 describes what happened to RCS participants as they came home, focusing on issues like employment, financial stability, and health. Chapter 4 offers some lessons and policy implications.

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<sup>42</sup>Because the RCS program and the evaluation both got started quickly, some of the earliest-enrolling participants (those who started the program in April or early May 2020) completed the survey approximately three months after enrollment.

<sup>43</sup>In semistructured interviews, the interviewer asks the interviewee open-ended questions from a list of formal questions that align with the research questions.



## Chapter 2

# The Returning Citizens Stimulus: Who Participated and How Did the Program Operate?

This chapter describes the origins of the Returning Citizens Stimulus (RCS) program and its model, provides background information on the returning citizens who participated in the program, and discusses how RCS was implemented.

As discussed in Chapter 1, returning citizens normally face significant challenges navigating reentry, such as stigma in the job and housing markets. In 2020 and early 2021 they faced the added challenge of navigating reentry during a pandemic and severe economic downturn. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) therefore launched RCS in April 2020. CEO is a national nonprofit organization offering comprehensive employment services for returning citizens that aims to improve clients' labor market prospects and reduce the odds that they will be reincarcerated. CEO provides people returning from prison or jail with immediate paid employment, skills training, and ongoing career support. To offer its participants work experience, CEO operates transitional work crews that provide indoor and outdoor maintenance and neighborhood-beautification services, as well as some warehouse and manufacturing work. In addition to work and daily pay, CEO provides a range of support services. On days participants are not working, they receive job coaching to help them in their search for full-time employment. At the time RCS was implemented, CEO had 30 locations in 11 states.

The RCS program began as a way of providing cash assistance to approximately 1,000 CEO clients whose access to temporary work and pay was suddenly cut off in April 2020 when stay-at-home orders required CEO to shut down its transitional work crews. With additional funding from foundations, CEO was able to expand the program through local reentry organization partners in 28 cities across the country, and to provide immediate financial support and connection to structured services to more than 10,000 returning citizens.

Table 2.1 shows the organizations that partnered with CEO to operate the program. All these organizations provide formal reentry support services to formerly incarcerated people; these services include case management, trauma counseling, transitional housing, education and employment assistance, mentorship, substance-use treatment, and opportunities for civic engagement. Some of the organizations promote restorative justice and decarceration through advocacy, community organizing, and public-policy development.<sup>1</sup> CEO was the central fiscal and managing agent for the program.

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<sup>1</sup>Decarceration is the practice or policy of reducing the number of people subject to imprisonment. Restorative justice is an approach to justice in which one of the responses to a crime is to organize a meeting between the victim and the offender, sometimes with representatives of the wider community. It emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior.

**Table 2.1**  
**Provider Services**

Provider	Education	Employment and Training	Financial Skills	Health Care	Housing	Mental and Behavioral Health	Other
<b>Denver</b>							
Second Chance Center	x	x	x		x	x	x
Servicios de la Raza	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
The Don't Look Back Center			x		x	x	x
The Empowerment Program		x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>Detroit</b>							
DLIVE	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Detroit Justice Center			x				x
Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit Health Management Systems of America	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x		x	x
<b>Los Angeles</b>							
A New Way of Life Reentry Project		x	x		x	x	x
Amity Foundation		x	x		x	x	x
Anti-Recidivism Coalition	x	x	x		x	x	x
Los Angeles County Workforce Development, Aging & Community Services		x					x
Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership		x					
Starting Over, Inc.		x			x	x	x
Turning Point	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Whole Systems Learning	x	x	x		x	x	x
<b>New Orleans</b>							
Operation Restoration	x	x	x		x	x	x
The First 72+		x	x		x	x	x
Total Community Action	x	x	x			x	x
Urban League of New Orleans	x	x	x			x	x
Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>New York City</b>							
Center for Community Alternatives	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Exodus Transitional Community	x	x	x		x	x	x
Osborne Association		x	x		x	x	x
The Fortune Society	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

(continued)



**Table 2.1 (continued)**

Provider	Education	Employment and Training	Financial Skills	Health Care	Housing	Mental and Behavioral Health	Other
Oakland							
Abode Services	x	x			x	x	
Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency	x	x			x	x	x
Five Keys Schools and Programs	x						
Lao Community Development	x	x	x		x	x	x
Roots Clinic		x	x	x		x	x
Tulsa							
Family & Children's Services		x	x	x	x	x	x
Resonance Center for Women	x	x			x	x	x
National/all cities							
Center for Employment Opportunities		x	x			x	x

SOURCE: Survey of organizations. New York City partners are listed but were not included in data collection due to research policy restrictions.

The primary objective of the RCS program was to provide returning citizens with immediate cash assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also connecting them to reentry services. It was designed as a multimonth initiative rather than a one-time relief check to provide participants with support over a stretch of time as they transitioned into their communities and new lives. This design also guaranteed that participants were connected to a reentry service provider for at least two months.

## The Design of RCS

As noted earlier, RCS participants were eligible to receive three “stimulus” payments totaling at least \$2,250 over a 60-day period, to spend as they needed. RCS participants were issued their first payments upon enrolling in the program. The second and third payments were issued at 30 and 60 days after enrollment, when participants reached specific program milestones.

In August 2020, RCS was expanded as part of the Returning Home Well initiative, which provided services such as housing, transportation, and employment support for Californians returning home from prison after July 1, 2020. The last payment of the original RCS program was distributed in April 2021, and the last payment of the Returning Home Well initiative was distributed in March 2021. In all, the RCS program provided cash assistance to 10,517 returning citizens in just 11 months.

Individuals enrolled in RCS through CEO or one of its partner organizations; the enrollment process was managed by reentry agency staff members. Enrolling in the program involved providing proof of release from incarceration, completing a form authorizing CEO to open a

Skylight pay card (the direct-payment system used by CEO), and completing a W-9 tax form, among other administrative tasks.

At enrollment, reentry program staff members helped participants select the 30-day milestone and 60-day milestone that they would have to reach in order to receive the second and third payments. Participants chose milestone tasks from a list of activities the partner organization offered. The reentry organizations and CEO collaborated on which activities were included in these lists; the activities had to be achievable and engage participants in services that facilitated their reentry. CEO approved all the activity lists to ensure some level of consistency across the organizations and to ensure that the milestones were not too difficult to reach. It was important that participants had autonomy in choosing their milestones and did not face significant barriers to receiving the financial support. Some examples of 30-day milestones include completing a résumé, creating a profile with a job search engine (such as Indeed), attending a budgeting workshop, and opening a bank account. Many of these examples represent milestones that the organizations have in place for all clients, not only RCS participants.

Another feature of the program was that all participants should receive a referral to a free tax-preparation service provider, so they could get help filing 2019 taxes and be eligible to receive additional federal stimulus payments. As the central managing agent, CEO issued all payments to program participants through its Skylight pay card system.

## The RCS Participants

Table 2.2 summarizes the background characteristics of RCS participants, overall and in the five cities with the highest enrollment. The average age of RCS participants was 39. About 78 percent of the participants self-identified as male, over half as Black (55 percent), and 21 percent as Hispanic. (As noted earlier, people with low incomes and Black and Hispanic people are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated.)

A little over half (55 percent) of participants reported that their highest degree earned was a high school diploma or equivalent, and almost a quarter (24 percent) had not completed high school.

Overall, about 60 percent of participants reported being released from prison and 40 percent reported being released from jail, but these percentages varied across cities. These differences probably represent differences in recruitment practices across cities and jurisdictions' varying sentencing policies and practices.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For example, California voters passed a measure in 2011, known as AB 109 Realignment, that allows defendants convicted of less serious felonies to serve their time in local county jails rather than state prisons.

**Table 2.2**  
**Baseline Characteristics**

Characteristic	All Cities	Detroit	Los Angeles	New Orleans	Oakland	Tulsa	Other Cities
Age at enrollment	38.5	39.1	38.3	40.2	37.5	38	39.1
Gender (%)							
Male	77.6	86.3	81.3	76.1	82.1	37.2	74.5
Female	22.1	13.7	18.3	23.6	17.9	62.6	25.5
Race (%)							
Asian	1.3	0	1.5	0	2.9	0	1.4
Black	54.8	89.9	47.6	90.1	64.9	19.5	31.1
Hispanic	21.3	0.9	34	0.3	16	3.6	22.3
White	14.9	7.7	10.2	6.6	7.8	55.6	33
Other/multiracial	7.7	1.5	6.7	3	8.4	21.3	12.3
Highest degree earned (%)							
Less than a high school degree	23.5	28.3	22.6	36.7	21.4	21.5	12.9
High school diploma or equivalent	55.5	50.7	56.2	47.1	66.2	44.4	57.1
Some college, no degree	16.3	17.1	16.9	11.1	10	24.9	22
Associate's degree	3	2.2	2.9	1.5	1.9	6.3	5.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	1.7	1.7	1.5	3.6	0.5	2.9	2.4
Residence type (%)							
Halfway house or three-quarter housing	13.8	17.5	13	10.9	10.2	18.6	18.1
Treatment program	15	0.2	26.2	0.3	2.4	8.6	14
Private residence	46.1	77	35.6	49.3	48.9	56.7	49.1
Public or subsidized housing	8.9	1.1	8.3	10.9	14.7	5.7	11
Shelter	9	3.5	7.4	23.5	15.2	3.4	3.5
Undomiciled	6.7	0.9	9.2	3.5	7.7	7	2.6
Financially responsible for at least one child (%)	28.7	46.5	22.8	29.9	36.5	37.1	19.4
Difficulty covering bills (%)							
Not difficult	3.1	2.2	2.1	0.7	9.8	3.7	0
A little difficult	5.8	7.9	4.7	8.9	5.9	6.6	5.4
Moderately difficult	13.3	19.1	13.1	10.6	12.5	13.9	10.9
Very difficult	31.9	29.4	36.3	27.9	29.7	20.7	26.4
Extremely difficult	46	41.4	43.8	51.9	42.1	55.1	57.3

(continued)

**Table 2.2 (continued)**

Characteristic	All Cities	Detroit	Los Angeles	New Orleans	Oakland	Tulsa	Other Cities
Released from (%)							
Prison	57.7	69.7	61.4	56.2	27.5	61	74.8
Jail/other	42.3	30.3	38.6	43.8	72.5	39	25.2
Total RCS amount received (\$)	2,257	2,113	2,404	2,031	2,192	2,125	2,130
Sample size	6,508	664	3,080	635	952	441	736

SOURCE: CEO management information system.

NOTE: The sample includes 6,508 RCS participants. In each city, there was a different cap on the RCS amount.

Almost half (46 percent) of RCS participants reported they were living in private residences when they enrolled in the program, presumably with family or friends. Research suggests that some returning citizens can secure temporary housing with friends or family members immediately after they are released. Often, these living arrangements do not turn into long-term, stable housing.<sup>3</sup> Several of the reentry organizations in Los Angeles were housing providers, which may explain why a third of Los Angeles participants were living in a residential treatment program, compared with an average of 15 percent across the other cities.

Most participants (70 percent) reported that they were not financially responsible for any children. Even so, almost all participants reported at least some degree of difficulty covering all their bills.

## The Implementation of RCS

This section presents findings from interviews with staff members from CEO and partner organizations who were critical to the implementation of the RCS program. The main purpose of these staff interviews was to gain information about the implementation of RCS and staff perceptions of it. This section also describes the rates at which participants reached milestones and received payments.

- **In general, the RCS enrollment process was easy to integrate into existing agency intake processes, and organizations relied on their existing referral and client networks to generate interest in the program.**

Nearly all staff members the study team interviewed reported that the RCS enrollment process was straightforward and involved a staff person describing the program and the required enrollment documents. They estimated that the enrollment process took an hour, though it could take more time if there was a language barrier between the staff person and the client. Eligible

<sup>3</sup>Roman and Travis (2004).

clients were identified through reentry organizations' existing connections or through word of mouth from people who had already enrolled. A few of the participants the study team interviewed mentioned that they heard about the program through their probation or parole officers. One interviewee said:

I found out about RCS through my PO [parole] agent. Someone from HMSA [an RCS partner organization] got in touch with me. It was very straightforward, and they explained it very well.... I'm a skeptic when it comes to anything, when someone says hey, we want to offer you this almost as a gift kind of, no strings attached. So, I was a little skeptical at first but once she [the person from HSMA] explained how it works to me, I was at ease.

Staff members reported that there was a lot of interest in the program, and they were quickly able to meet or exceed their enrollment targets. They reported that their caseloads grew larger, but most were able to manage those increased caseloads. Some staff members who worked at smaller organizations said it was difficult to enroll new RCS participants while managing their growing caseloads, most likely because their organizations did not have enough people to manage the additional work.

- **The process for making payments when participants reached milestones was straightforward and aligned with the ways reentry organizations already provided services.**

Reentry organization staff members found that the process for RCS participants to reach milestones aligned well with their existing processes and requirements. Thus, staff found it easy to incorporate RCS milestones into existing program requirements, and they were able to select milestones based on their clients' needs. Both staff members and RCS participants reported that the process for participants who reached milestones was straightforward. Staff members attributed this ease to the program's structure, which allowed participants to choose the milestones they wanted to reach.

Staff members emphasized that it was important to encourage RCS participants to choose milestones that would help them accomplish their individual goals during their transition period. Some mentioned that they adjusted milestones to ensure that they were most useful for the individual needs and goals of RCS participants. For example, one staff member initially required RCS participants to complete a résumé and a budgeting workshop together as a milestone, but some RCS participants reported that the work-readiness workshop was more useful than completing the résumé, so that staff person adapted the milestone.

Across the reentry organizations, there were very few cases of RCS participants who did not reach milestones. If RCS participants could not reach the milestones on time—because of employment scheduling conflicts, for example—then staff members created workarounds to maintain engagement. For example, they allowed participants to attend different workshops that fit better in their schedules. Table 2.3 shows the tasks completed to receive milestone payments

**Table 2.3****Tasks Completed to Receive Milestone Payments**

Milestone	Percentage	Total
Employment	60.3	3,926
Completed a résumé	37.8	2,458
Completed an employment workshop	23.2	1,511
Enrolled with an employment provider	6.9	451
Completed an employment assessment	4.7	308
Got a job	4.5	291
Searched for a job	3.2	211
Completed a job plan	3.0	195
Applied for a job	1.8	120
Purchased work clothing/tools	1.0	64
Financial security	29.7	1,930
Created a budget	16.5	1,072
Completed a financial education workshop	11.4	742
Opened a bank account	6.3	411
Enrolled in SNAP/Medicaid/SSI benefits	1.8	120
Health	15.8	1,031
Completed a health evaluation	7.6	495
Attended mentoring/therapy/other counseling	7.3	478
Passed a drug test/had a doctor's appointment	1.2	79
Housing	6.5	426
Applied for housing	3.3	214
Secured housing	1.5	99
Completed a housing plan/attended a housing workshop	1.4	91
Paid rent	0.6	39
Family	2.1	135
Attended life skills/parenting class	1.6	105
Paid child support/sought childcare	0.4	24
Reunited with family	0.1	7
Schooling	0.7	43
Enrolled in school/high school equivalency program/trade school	0.7	43

(continued)

**Table 2.3 (continued)**

Milestone	Percentage	Total
Other	15.1	981
Purchased a car	5.3	342
Bought a phone	4.3	281
Created an email address	2.0	129
Completed an individual services plan	1.3	86
Obtained a driver's license/SS card/other identification	1.7	110
Obtained legal services	0.4	25
Volunteered	0.1	6
Uncategorized	17.5	1,136
Sample size		6,508

SOURCE: CEO management information system.

NOTE: Milestone data from CEO's management information system were cleaned and categorized by MDRC. This table does not reflect a comprehensive view of RCS participants' accomplishments during the program. Rather, it shows common tasks that were completed in order to receive milestone payments. For example, it is likely that more participants paid child support, but those payments would not be reflected in the table if they reported different activities as their milestones. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; SSI = Supplemental Security Income; SS = Social Security.

in various categories. It is important to note that Table 2.3 only takes activities into account when participants engaged in them to qualify for RCS payments. It is possible that the percentage of participants who engaged in the activities is higher. In summary:

- **Almost two-thirds of participants reached an employment-related milestone.** The most common employment milestones reached were: (1) completing a résumé (38 percent), (2) completing an employment workshop (23 percent), and (3) enrolling with an organization focused on providing employment (7 percent). Between 3 percent and 5 percent of clients reached a milestone by completing an employment assessment, completing a job plan, conducting a job search, or securing employment. Fewer than 2 percent of participants reached a milestone by applying for a job, purchasing work clothing or tools, or completing an I-9 form.
- **Thirty percent of participants reached milestones related to financial security.** The activities they completed to reach these milestones included creating a budget (17 percent), completing a financial education workshop (11 percent), opening a bank account (6 percent), and enrolling in benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, or Supplemental Security Income (2 percent).

- **Sixteen percent of participants reached health-related milestones.** These milestones included completing a health evaluation (8 percent); attending mentoring, therapy, or other counseling (7 percent); and passing a drug test or having a doctor’s appointment (1 percent).
- **Almost 7 percent of clients reached housing-related milestones.** About half of these milestones (3 percent) were applying for housing or apartment rentals. Additionally, 3 percent of participants completed a housing plan or secured housing. Fewer than 1 percent of clients recorded paying rent as a milestone.
- **Other milestones that were reached include:** purchasing a car (5 percent); buying a phone (4 percent); creating an email address (2 percent); obtaining a driver’s license, Social Security card, or other form of identification (2 percent); attending a life-skills or parenting class (2 percent); and completing an individual services plan (1 percent). Fewer than 1 percent of participants reached milestones such as enrolling in school or a high school equivalency program, obtaining legal services, paying child support or seeking childcare, reuniting with family members, or volunteering.

Because so many participants reached milestones, nearly 93 percent of them received two or three payments (see Figure 2.1). As mentioned above, all participants automatically received the first payment after enrolling. Only 7 percent received only the first payment. Participants received a total of \$2,256 in payments, on average. The average payment amount was consistent across cities. The program issued payments to more than 10,000 people between April 2020 and April 2021, distributing over \$24 million to eligible returning citizens.

- **Staff members reported that the Skylight pay card accounts worked well for a large majority of participants.**

Staff members mentioned that only a few RCS participants had trouble getting access to the funds on their Skylight pay cards. Some RCS participant accounts were flagged for verification, which required those individuals to provide additional forms of identification (such as a Social Security card or state-issued identification).<sup>4</sup> Because of the pandemic, staff members had varied experiences addressing these situations. For example, in one location, staff members said it was challenging for participants to obtain identification because government agencies were closed, or did not have available appointments for several months because of COVID-19 restrictions. In another location, returning citizens were not released from prison with identification that may have normally been provided if not for the pandemic. Staff members came up with workarounds such as obtaining alternate forms of identification. This need for identification is a version of a common problem for returning citizens: A lack of legal documents prevents many from engaging with the formal banking sector. Nonetheless, staff members reported that these challenges affected only a small proportion of their RCS participants.

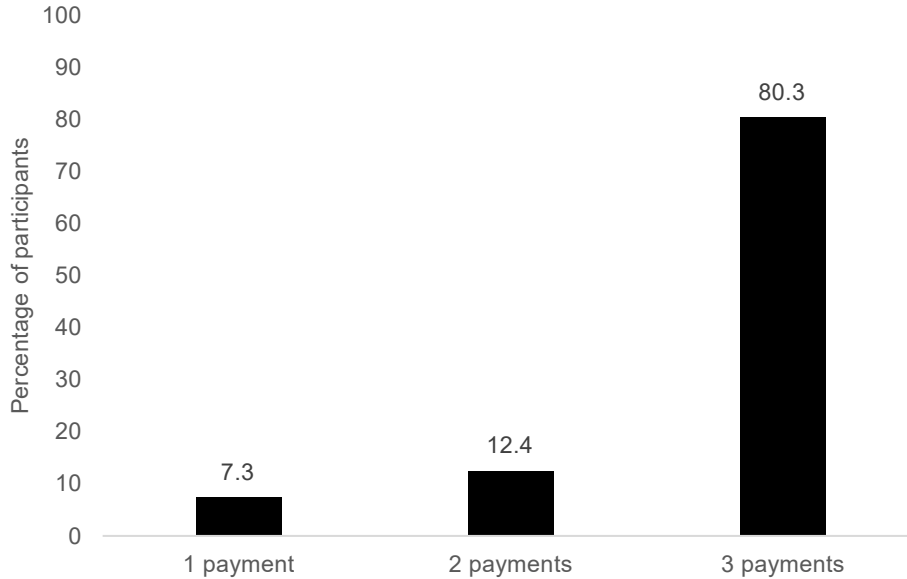
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<sup>4</sup>CEO staff members reported that they have made an appeal to Skylight about exceptions to these requirements for identification, and they are waiting for a definitive answer.



Figure 2.1

**Percentages of RCS Participants Receiving One, Two, and Three Payments**



SOURCE: CEO management information system.

NOTE: The sample includes 6,508 RCS participants.

Some staff members said they encouraged their RCS participants to open checking or savings accounts. They said that a few of these participants—especially those who had been incarcerated for more than 15 years—expressed mistrust of financial institutions or were not familiar with online banking practices. They worked to make these individuals more comfortable by providing education in online financial transactions and debit cards.

- **Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies began to offer virtual and remote services. Some staff members found it challenging to offer their new RCS participants the same support as they had offered returning citizens in pre-COVID-19 times, largely because many participants faced technological barriers.**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, reentry organizations began offering more virtual and remote services. Staff members were adjusting to these COVID-19-related operational changes at the same time they were launching the RCS program. Because there was limited time for planning, many found that it was hard to carry out their work effectively and offer all their clients the same attention as they had before the pandemic. Nearly all staff members said that the people they work with often do not have the skills or the actual devices they would need to engage effectively with virtual services. They said that returning citizens may be uncomfortable with new

technological platforms because prison/jail systems do not always provide them with the education or tools necessary to advance their technology-related skills. The digital skills gap is even more evident for individuals who have served longer sentences. One staff member mentioned that many participants, RCS participants in particular, are older and have spent significant portions of their lifetimes incarcerated where computers and other skill-based services may be limited or nonexistent. Staff members working with these individuals found it more difficult to offer virtual services. Despite these challenges, staff members reported that they worked hard to implement the RCS program and help participants succeed while interacting mostly virtually.

Staff members emphasized that taking the initiative to communicate with RCS participants, especially those who struggled using technology, was critical if they were to offer the same level and quality of support that they provided under normal circumstances. They also said it was important for them to take the initiative in communicating with other service providers and agencies in their area, to ensure that their RCS participants received access to the resources they needed for their transition and safety during the pandemic. However, some reported that they were not always able to reach these other service providers and agencies, because many were temporarily shut down or had reduced their staffs.

To help their clients make the switch to receiving services virtually and remotely, staff members spent time educating all of them, including RCS participants, about how to use technology to meet their needs during their transition back home. Most staff members agreed that it was very important to educate their clients about how to use technology, and some said that they intended to continue offering education in technology even after the pandemic ended.

## **Summary**

The pandemic presented an opportunity for CEO to do something that had never been done before on a large scale: implement a direct cash assistance program with recently released individuals. RCS was designed and launched in a little over a month in several cities and with many reentry organizations. Overall, implementation of RCS was a success. The processes for people to enroll in RCS and then reach their milestones were straightforward, and integrated well with the partner organizations' existing service-provision processes. As a result, RCS enrolled a great many returning citizens, and most participants received all three payments. The milestone system was flexible enough that participants could exercise some level of autonomy and select milestones that met their individual needs. Most participants reached their employment-related milestones.

## Chapter 3

# The Reentry Experiences of Returning Citizens Stimulus Program Participants

This chapter discusses the immediate and near-term economic outcomes and measures of well-being of the returning citizens who received Returning Citizens Stimulus (RCS) payments and participated in the program. The following topics are discussed below: (1) the transition back home, (2) economic mobility and employment, (3) financial stability, and (4) mental and physical health. These topics were selected because together they are the major dimensions of the reentry experience and its challenges. It was important to understand whether the RCS program affected participants' lives in these areas, and if it did, how. The analysis draws on the participant surveys, participant interviews, and staff interviews.

Throughout this chapter are quotes from participants alongside survey and program data, because the study team believes it is crucial to hear participants' voices. Transitioning back into a community following incarceration can be extremely challenging for returning citizens in the short and long term. Each individual's experience with the transition period is unique, and therefore the discussion here should not be considered representative of all RCS participants. But it does represent the experiences of at least some participants.

## The Transition Back Home

- **The RCS program eased participants' transition back into their homes and communities because of its connection to reentry programs and the financial relief it provided.**

A participant from Detroit who enrolled in the RCS program through Health Management Systems of America described the transition home as follows:

When you come out and you've been incarcerated for elongated periods of time, you come home and you're not allowed the same opportunities as others are. You can try your best and really be diligent in trying to establish employment or schooling but there are just a lot of obstacles and hurdles to clear and jump through in order to be able to move forward with your life. It's sad but it almost seems like society wants you to stay in your place as an ex-felon or ex-convict.

This same sentiment was expressed by a participant in Oakland who enrolled in RCS through the Lao Family Community Development program:

It has been my experience that the majority of people come home wanting to not go back to jail, and it's all these hurdles that pop up that seem like they're intentionally placed in your way to keep you from being successful.

Both quotes highlight how psychologically burdensome the transition back home can be for returning citizens because of legal and regulatory restrictions on them, and the discriminatory

views employers and others have of them due to their criminal histories.<sup>1</sup> It can be very difficult for returning citizens to overcome these obstacles.

From conversations with participants, the study team learned that family support, structured services, and financial relief from RCS helped the participants focus on overcoming the challenges of reentry. Supportive relationships, whether they be with family, friends, or community members, really matter for returning citizens' success coming back home. For some, the transition back into their homes or communities was easier because of relationships that they maintained while they were incarcerated. Many others, especially those who were incarcerated for longer stretches, had seen relationships fade or people pass away, and had to make the transition without the support of family or friends. Individuals who had strong supporters to turn to when they returned home recognized how helpful it was to have those people in their lives, and acknowledged that for people who do not have that support or who have nothing to return home to, the transition is much harder.

The RCS program model was designed to address that challenge by connecting all participants with the partner community-based reentry organizations. Participants found this part of the program model to be very beneficial. As one participant from Detroit—who returned home after being incarcerated for nearly 30 years—described it:

My worst day out here is better than my best day in prison. Although it has been a lot of trauma in terms of dealing with COVID-19 and a lot of other issues, thank god for organizations like Flip the Script [a Goodwill program] and this RCS program who have shown concern for people like myself.

The financial relief from RCS helped participants focus on meeting their needs and establishing their sense of independence back home. Some RCS participants shared that having the financial stimulus from RCS helped them reintegrate with families or friends. Among these participants, some said that the stimulus helped them to establish that they were a financially independent part of these relationships. Others appreciated that the stimulus allowed them to contribute to household finances and ease the financial stress of their loved ones.

## Employment

- **Participants' had different amounts of success securing and maintaining employment. Those who had difficulty obtaining employment most often cited the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason why. The RCS program helped participants somewhat in this process because of its connection to reentry employment programs and because its financial support allowed participants to prepare for working.**

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<sup>1</sup>Holzer, Rafael, and Stoll (2007); Pager (2003, 2007).

## RCS and Employment Patterns

Most RCS participants came home and were searching for jobs during the height of the pandemic lockdowns and the associated period of high unemployment (March to July 2020). This widespread economic dislocation posed an even greater challenge to returning citizens, who face many additional barriers when trying to gain meaningful employment following incarceration. During interviews, participants shared some examples of the barriers to employment they faced, which included but were not limited to (1) employer prejudices and discrimination, (2) limited access to necessary skills training or education before and during incarceration, and (3) limited access to a professional network before and during incarceration.

The results of the surveys and interviews paint a mixed picture of employment patterns among RCS participants. As shown in Table 3.1, in the two-month follow-up survey, 30 percent of respondents reported that they were employed; the percentage of respondents who reported being employed increased to 44 percent in the five-month follow-up survey (administered three months after participants received their last payments). It is important to note that it is not possible to infer that the RCS program caused the increase in employment. Generally, an increase in employment over time is expected for a population who is actively trying to secure jobs. In fact, these findings are in line with the Returning Home Study, which explored employment outcomes for people after they left prison through two- and eight-month follow-up surveys. The study found that two months after being released from prison, 31 percent of respondents reported being employed, and at eight months 45 percent reported being employed.<sup>2</sup>

Among those who were unemployed at the time of the two-month follow-up survey, respondents cited “COVID-19” (23 percent) and “couldn’t find any work” (20 percent) as the main reasons. In conversations with RCS participants, the study team learned that COVID-19-specific barriers to employment were most often related to business closures, staff layoffs, and COVID-19 outbreaks within factories.

At many employers, especially in those industries that hire many returning citizens (such as construction, maintenance, manufacturing, and automotive repair), the COVID-19-related shutdowns posed significant barriers for RCS participants. For example, one participant in Los Angeles said that the city’s lockdown orders halted his own search for employment:

I wasn’t actively job searching at the time because we were on the stay-at-home orders.... If I wasn’t on the stay-at-home order, I would have looked myself.

Returning Home Well participants in California were particularly likely to face these problems, since stay-at-home orders there were common and strictly enforced. Of those who were unemployed at the time of the five-month follow-up survey, 38 percent said that “COVID-19” was the main reason, double the percentage from the two-month follow-up survey.

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<sup>2</sup>Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner (2008).

**Table 3.1**  
**Employment After Release from Incarceration**

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
Had a paid job at any time since release from incarceration		
No	43.2	29.2
Yes, currently working	29.7	43.5
Has been employed, but not currently working	22.8	23.4
Main reason for not working		
Couldn't find any work	20.3	12.0
COVID-19	22.7	38.9
Disabled	10.9	13.3
Had a job but was laid off or temporarily put on leave	9.2	6.4
Waiting for a new job to begin	7.5	4.3
In school or other training	7.1	6.8
Temporary health issue	5.8	3.0
Family responsibilities	2.4	3.0
Childcare problems	2.0	2.1
Retired	1.0	1.3
Sample size	452	452

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021.

### **RCS and Employment Services**

RCS furthered participants' efforts to find employment in a variety of ways, primarily by creating a connection to reentry programs and staff members who could help them search for jobs. Many reentry program providers offer employment support services to help their clients obtain meaningful employment following incarceration. All the RCS participants the study team interviewed said that the program's milestone requirements related to searching for a job (completing a résumé or completing a profile on a job search engine, for example) and employment preparation (employment-readiness workshops or mock interviews, for example) were helpful and motivated them.

The Amity Foundation program in Los Angeles represents one example of a reentry program that offers job search and preparation services as part of its model. One RCS participant who enrolled in RCS through the Amity Foundation said that one of the employment-related milestones he reached helped him with his career planning:

I completed the career planning course.... That stood out to me the most. It was cool because I had never sat down and thought about my career like that.

Reentry service providers also helped participants learn some of the skills they needed to find and secure employment. Most of the RCS participants the study team interviewed said that coming home during the pandemic, a time when the country was forced to rely on technology like never before, was especially difficult for them because they had not had sufficient opportunity to learn how to use technology while incarcerated. Employers and even some reentry service providers do not always recognize that some returning citizens have much less experience with technology than others, nor do they have the resources or staff to provide training in this area. It was especially challenging for participants who had served longer sentences to search for jobs in a completely virtual environment and to learn to use online job search engines. Some of the participants who talked about this barrier to securing employment said that it was helpful to be connected with the staff members implementing RCS because those staff members helped them navigate the technology and virtual job search process.

Another way that RCS furthered participants' search for employment was by enabling them to cover daily expenses until they found stable, meaningful work. A participant from Oakland noted, "The money allowed me the freedom to go look for something [employment] on my own and to still get by." Nearly all the RCS participants the study team spoke with said that the stimulus money was useful for obtaining necessary items (cell phones, clothing, and toiletries) to prepare them for interviews and the job search process. From their perspective, having the financial support helped them feel more confident and ready for employment.

A small number of RCS participants said that they used the stimulus money to start their own businesses. For example, one participant from Los Angeles who received the stimulus money through the Amity Foundation said:

Right now, I have my own cargo business. I used that money [RCS] to help buy the van that I got.... I got out of prison prepared to go to work.

Another participant in Los Angeles who received the stimulus money through Total Community Action had a similar experience:

Since I was 13, I've been cutting hair. I do mobile cuts. RCS ... helped ... me to get some tools and get my thing off the ground ... and be able to survive out here. 'Cause I didn't have nothing. So that was big, and I appreciate that.

## **Financial Security and Access to Resources**

- **The RCS program helped participants feel more financially stable and establish themselves following incarceration. Most RCS participants spent the payments on everyday expenses related to housing, transportation, groceries, clothing, and utilities. Still, many participants struggled to cover larger expenses (for example, rent) and mounting bills (for example, credit card debt).**

Nearly all RCS participants the study team spoke with reported that the RCS payments were a tremendous relief for them, as the financial stress associated with coming home is very difficult to manage. Participants said that it was a great comfort knowing that they could cover some of their bills until they obtained income from employment. All the RCS participants interviewed said that it was very empowering for them to be able to spend the money on what they needed.

## **RCS Spending Patterns**

### *Covering Essential Expenses*

Because of the structure of the RCS payments, participants had full control over how they spent the money. The survey results and interviews make it clear that most RCS participants spent it on essential resources to help them get back on their feet. Table 3.2 shows how survey respondents said they used the RCS funds. About 60 percent reported that they spent the money on food, housing, transportation, or utilities. The RCS participants the study team interviewed told a similar story. The most common examples of how they used the payments were: rent/housing costs, bills and overhead household expenses, obtaining cell phones, transportation (purchasing a car and paying for gas), clothing for interviews, food, and savings. One individual came home with only two outfits and was able to get more clothes with the RCS payment. One employed participant from Los Angeles said:

I put some money in the bank. I was able to pay my phone bill. I bought a little car, got some gas and some food to sustain me so I could work this job.

The payments were especially helpful for those who were unemployed and looking for a job or who were unable to work due to a disability, because the money allowed them to cover day-to-day expenses.

### *Court Fines and Fees*

About 19 percent used the funds to pay fines or fees owed to the courts or supervision agencies.<sup>3</sup> A little over 40 percent of respondents reported that they owed court fines and fees (42 percent on both the two- and five-month follow-up surveys). The study team only interviewed four participants who said that they used part of the RCS money to pay fines and fees to the criminal justice system. One participant, who enrolled in RCS through the Detroit Justice Center, said that he used the money to pay off his supervision fees, which amounted to \$600. He chose to pay off the entire fee amount to have it “off his back,” and directed the rest of the money toward resources he needed to get himself ready for employment. Another RCS participant who enrolled in RCS through A New Way of Life shared that he had spent all his previous savings on court-related fees upon his release, so the RCS money went toward rebuilding his savings account.

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<sup>3</sup>Some municipalities require returning citizens who are on community supervision (parole or probation) to pay a monthly fee.



**Table 3.2**  
**Uses of RCS Payments**

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
What did you spend RCS money on?		
Food/groceries	61.2	55.2
Regular expenses such as rent, transportation, or utilities	57.7	56.8
Other bills such as credit card or medical bills	22.9	20.8
Savings for some future payment or emergency	22.4	12.5
Things to help child(ren) in school	21.1	17.0
Fines or fees owed to the courts or supervision agencies	18.9	17.0
A treat for oneself or others	15.4	12.2
To help other family members or friends with their expenses	12.6	8.9
A major purchase such as a house, a major appliance, or a car	12.4	0.0
Health or dental care, or health insurance	8.2	5.6
Security deposit for an apartment	7.5	7.4
Childcare or child support payments	7.5	4.7
Sample size	976	665

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021.

Nonetheless, RCS participants who were not working or who were unable to work said that the RCS payments could only relieve some of their financial burdens. Table 3.3 shows that almost half of the survey respondents reported that they found it very difficult to cover bills, and this percentage stayed relatively constant between the two- and five-month follow-up surveys. Many respondents said that they had difficulty paying bills or costs related to rent/utilities, credit cards, and food. The percentage of respondents who reported having difficulty paying rent increased slightly from 48 percent on the two-month follow-up survey to 55 percent on the five-month survey. The percentage who reported renting their own rooms, houses, or apartments also increased between surveys from 40 percent to 50 percent, which may help explain why more respondents were having difficulty paying rent even though employment was higher at five months. The percentages who reported having difficulty paying credit card bills and food expenses remained about the same between the two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

### **RCS and Housing**

Housing stability is a very important part of reentry into the community, and in interviews RCS participants talked about having varying degrees of success in finding stable shelter. Recent studies estimate that returning citizens are 10 times more likely to become homeless than the

**Table 3.3**  
**Difficulty Paying Bills**

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
Difficulty covering bills		
Not difficult	11.1	15.3
Somewhat difficult	39.0	39.2
Very difficult	43.9	43.5
What bills have you had difficulty covering?		
Rent/utilities	47.6	54.9
Food	37.6	36.3
Credit card bills	33.4	29.9
Medical	12.2	9.1
Childcare	12.0	8.2
Car/transportation	4.9	3.1
Phone	3.1	1.1
Clothing/personal hygiene items	3.8	1.3
Court fees and other legal costs	0.9	0.4
Sample size	452	452

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021.

general public, especially during the period immediately following incarceration.<sup>4</sup> There are obvious, well-known barriers that this population faces when searching for and obtaining housing. In particular, they face a lack of affordable housing options and discrimination from public housing authorities.<sup>5</sup> The RCS participants who did not return to living with family or friends said it was difficult to find affordable housing. As one participant from New Orleans said:

It was the same challenge [as with employment] with housing. What’s out there within the range that I can afford, that’s mostly like apartments, and the apartment complexes and management don’t want to take up your application because you have convictions.

One RCS participant shared that he was homeless and sleeping on park benches until he was able to obtain stable housing, which his attorney found for him. Another participant was sleeping in a van, which he preferred to staying in transitional housing or a homeless shelter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Couloute (2018).

<sup>5</sup>Couloute (2018).

<sup>6</sup>“Transitional housing” refers to a supportive—yet temporary—type of accommodation that is meant to bridge the gap from homelessness to permanent housing by offering structure, supervision, support (for

Another participant from Detroit described the importance of stable housing for maintaining his parole:

It's like, do you get the car or the house? I rather get somewhere to stay first rather than get a car to run around the city trying to find somewhere to sleep. I'm on curfew so I got to be stable, so the house was my first priority.

These experiences align with what research has previously found. Estimates vary, but at least 10 percent to 15 percent of returning citizens are homeless soon after release for some period.<sup>7</sup> From interviews, the study team gathered that it is not uncommon for returning citizens to feel that the housing options they could gain access to more easily (that is, transitional housing programs) could be risky or dangerous, and that they were not necessarily a good option for them if they were to be surrounded by people or activities there that could jeopardize their paroles.

RCS participants in Los Angeles and Oakland said that one of the biggest sources of financial stress for them upon returning home was rent money, because the costs of living in those two cities are relatively high. For those who struggled to obtain secure and affordable housing, the RCS payments helped to cover the initial costs of living (security deposits and a couple of months of rent). Most RCS participants interviewed, both those living with family or friends and those living on their own, said that they used some or all of the RCS funds to cover housing costs and sought help from program staff members to learn about more housing options in their area. The findings from these conversations align with the survey data. As shown in Table 3.4, survey respondents tended to live with family (about 40 percent lived with parents, children, or other relatives). About a third reported “other” living situations.

As mentioned previously, survey responses show that the proportion of respondents who rented their own rooms, houses, or apartments increased by about 10 percentage points between the two- and five-month follow-up surveys and over half of the respondents used RCS payments to cover rent/utilities. These percentages suggest that RCS helped some participants cover housing expenses and, in some cases, may have even helped some participants secure housing. That is, RCS funds may have helped some participants gain some initial access to independent living—they may have used the money to cover one-time costs such as security deposits, first-month rent, and application fees. Nevertheless, on both the two- and five-month follow-up surveys, about a third of respondents reported that their housing was unstable or that they were unsure about their housing situations.

### **RCS and Transportation**

Many RCS participants reported that program payments helped them afford reliable transportation, thereby increasing their sense of financial stability. Without access to transporta-

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addictions and mental health, for example), training in life skills, and, in some cases, other forms of education and training.

<sup>7</sup>Roman and Travis (2004).

**Table 3.4**  
**Housing Status**

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
<b>Living situation</b>		
With parents	16.4	16.6
Alone	15.9	18.4
With other relatives	13.1	14.6
With children	12.2	12.8
With a partner	3.5	7.7
With a friend	5.1	6.2
With other	31.6	20.1
<b>Housing status</b>		
Rent your room/house/apartment	39.4	49.2
Live in a home that somebody else owns/rents (you do not pay rent)	19.5	20.1
Halfway house or three-quarter house or work-release housing	15.7	9.7
In-patient treatment program	5.4	1.4
Unknown/other	4.7	4.3
Couch surfing or moving from place to place	5.2	4.1
In a house/apartment you own	4.7	6.1
Somewhere not designated for long-term accommodation	2.9	3.4
A shelter	2.7	1.8
<b>Housing stability</b>		
Long-term or stable	33.0	42.7
Temporary (such as couch surfing or a treatment program)	29.0	21.3
Unsure	21.4	19.4
Unstable (about to lose housing, looking for new housing)	11.1	12.2
Sample size	452	452

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021.

tion, returning citizens may have trouble finding and keeping jobs. The RCS money helped several of the participants interviewed address this barrier by purchasing vehicles to get to and from work. It also helped participants pay for public transportation or gas. Unfortunately, however, the stimulus money only went so far. A participant from Detroit said that after a car accident he was unable to go back and forth to work. And unfortunately, because he had already used most of the RCS money to purchase the car, he did not have enough to cover the repairs. He said:

Just transportation—that’s the only thing I’m lacking that the program [Goodwill Detroit] couldn’t help me with.... Why should we go find the job, and we get the job, and now we don’t even have reliable transportation to keep the job?

From conversations with RCS participants, it became clear that gaining access to reliable transportation involved other obstacles that were only exacerbated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it can be very difficult for returning citizens to obtain their driver’s licenses following incarceration.

## Mental and Physical Health

- **RCS and the connection it gave participants to staff members at the partner reentry organizations provided participants with psychological support during their transition back home.**

This section provides information about RCS participants’ physical and mental health. Because of the sensitive nature of personal health matters, the study team asked interview participants whether they felt comfortable answering questions about their physical and mental health before proceeding. Not all of them said yes, so not all 26 interview participants were asked about COVID-19 and their personal health. It is also important to note that there may be self-reporting bias present in the conclusions drawn from the interviews the team did do. Moreover, this report does not present comprehensive data about participants’ mental and physical health, as little information on the subject was available for the study period.

### Mental Health

Mental and physical illness are widespread and too often underaddressed in the U.S. prison population.<sup>8</sup> Only between 13 percent and 14 percent of survey respondents reported receiving mental health services, but the literature on returning citizens and some of the interviews suggest that many more of them may have faced mental health challenges.<sup>9</sup> Among the RCS participants who were comfortable discussing their mental health, it was clear that the trauma associated with being incarcerated and returning home during a global pandemic took a significant toll. For these participants, the stresses and anxieties related to coming back home—including but not limited to those related to securing meaningful employment and income, rebuilding relationships, and meeting supervision conditions—felt more overwhelming in the context of the pandemic. Participants also felt a strain on their mental health from the stigma that faces returning citizens. One participant said he had encountered negative stigmas meant to make him feel like he was not deserving of a second chance. He said:

When you get out and have the drive to change your life and be an asset to society and everyone is telling you ‘nah, we can’t help you because you’ve been to jail,’ then it’s discouraging.

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<sup>8</sup>James and Glaze (2006).

<sup>9</sup>Mallik-Kane and Visher (2008).

He also said, however, that his mental resilience helped him to ignore those unforgiving attitudes.

A couple of participants shared that it is extremely difficult to really rehabilitate mentally after coming home, and sometimes it can even be challenging to have the mental wherewithal to want to receive the help that is available. One participant said:

The mental aspect of rehabilitation is so important but overlooked. I mean, if you get help in other ways or financial support but you're not mentally capable of dealing with it, then it's not as impactful. People coming home need support with how to deal with the stresses.... When I got put in jail I was still young. I got incarcerated when I was 19. So mentally, it's hard to explain. Your mind is so torn up. I can't say that the help is not there, it's that the freedom and solitude are two different things. When you're incarcerated it's like you're a slave, period. All these things are in place to help and you know the people are there, but the mindset of freedom, sometimes it takes a lot to want to receive the help. But programs, services in place, they can't necessarily help the people in the way that they need it. There is only so few people who really have the training and know how to actually support us and deal with people on a mental level. It takes a long time to recover.

Of the participants who discussed mental health issues, some mentioned that RCS had in part eased the stresses and anxieties associated with transitioning home. These participants said that they experienced less anxiety as a result of participating in it. To them, it felt good to know that society cared about their success during the transition home. For example, a participant from Los Angeles said, "It's nice that somebody actually wants to help us start our life once we get out. It shows people care. That we're not all animals."

Program staff members similarly reported that RCS positively affected their participants' sense of self-esteem and mental stability. According to them, the stimulus made participants feel like they were not starting from scratch. One staff member said:

I think the biggest benefit of RCS is the psychological stability that it generates. When somebody's coming home and they have nothing, RCS is giving them a leg up. It shows them society cares, that somebody's trying to make a difference in their life.

## **Physical Health**

Nearly all RCS participants the study team interviewed said that they were in good physical health and had not faced significant issues in getting health care when needed. These responses contrast with what research has found regarding the physical health of incarcerated and returning citizens. Research shows that incarcerated individuals exhibit higher rates of health problems than the general population, and especially higher rates of chronic illnesses such as HIV, Hepatitis C, and tuberculosis.<sup>10</sup> Only 2 of the 26 interviewed participants said that their physical health was not good. In both cases, the study team learned that the individuals' health issues had developed while they were incarcerated and required attention after their release. A

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<sup>10</sup>Roman and Travis (2004).

few of the 26 interviewed participants had trouble receiving medicines, receiving medical attention on time, or attending to their health care visits, because they were uninsured due to employment fluctuations or part-time employment. One participant shared that he had to delay a surgery he needed and had continued working, despite his physical pain, because he was waiting to receive the medical insurance benefit and save up money to cover the surgery.

The pandemic took a significant toll on U.S. prisons and jails. Most participants said, however, that they had not had COVID-19 previously and did not have it at the time of the interview. A few interviewees did say that they had had COVID-19 in the past. One man said that his COVID-19 was made worse by the poor medical care and attention he received from the program provider he had to live with as a result of his sentence. One participant shared that he used the RCS money to buy his usually prescribed medication and additional medicine to support his recovery from COVID-19. The study team heard more from participants about their fears and trauma associated with COVID-19. Some experienced heightened fear of getting COVID-19 as a result of their overcrowded living conditions. Others experienced intense grief witnessing their fellow inmates struggle with or die from COVID-19.

## **Summary**

Participants reported that the RCS program helped them feel more financially stable as they transitioned home, and that it reduced their mental stress and anxieties. Most RCS participants spent the payments on everyday expenses like housing, transportation, groceries, and bills. Over the two months of stimulus payments, RCS also connected most participants to reentry organizations where they received services—specifically employment-related services.





## Chapter 4

# Conclusion and Policy Discussion

Returning citizens face countless barriers to a successful transition as they reenter society: strained family relationships, few or no personal financial resources to meet their basic needs, lack of stable employment and housing, and mental and physical health challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession it caused only made things harder.

The Returning Citizens Stimulus (RCS) program helped returning citizens get their footing during a time of crisis. With the RCS program, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) and its partners designed and executed a cash transfer program for returning citizens in a very short time. The implementation findings show that a cash transfer program can be implemented well and on a large scale very quickly. Over 11 months, the RCS program gave over \$24 million to over 10,000 people. The motivation for the program was to address the financial needs of returning citizens coming home during a global pandemic. The RCS program's design focused on factors that facilitate successful reentry: financial security and direct access to structured services.

The purpose of this study was to document how participants experienced the RCS program. At this point, this study does not aim to draw conclusions about the program's effects nor participants' long-term outcomes. For policymakers to design better solutions for returning citizens, it is important that they listen to and learn from returning citizens themselves, as well as organizations that work directly with returning citizens. The study team concentrated on learning more about RCS participants' experiences returning home and receiving this one-of-a-kind cash transfer.

- As anticipated, it appears that most RCS participants spent the funds to meet basic needs and that the payments relieved some of the stress associated with reentry. Some participants used the funds in ways that may position them for longer-term success—for example, by meeting expenses associated with finding a job or making equipment purchases for starting their own businesses.
- A conviction remains a significant barrier making it harder for returning citizens to gain meaningful employment, and the COVID-19 pandemic only made that reality worse. The RCS program connected participants to reentry providers that offered employment services. Moreover, the program's employment-centered milestone requirements, especially those focused on searching for jobs, building skills, and increasing job readiness, were a useful structure for participants.
- RCS participants appreciated that the program connected them to structured services and staff members who showed concern for them. Those connections otherwise might not have come about. In their eyes, the program offered more

than financial assistance, it showed them that people care. Participants felt seen, and they felt like their struggles during reentry were recognized. From participants' perspective, the program gave them resources and tools they needed to move forward. When asked whether this program should continue beyond COVID-19, many participants said that if a program like RCS became standard practice, it could prevent people who just got out of incarceration from doing something illegal for money, or something that could put them in harm's way. Additionally, the findings suggest that the RCS multipayment timeline and milestone structure gave participants an incentive to maintain a connection with reentry service providers for a longer time, which benefited them.

- The program model was implemented successfully. The milestone requirements associated with payments gave participants and service providers a useful process and structure. Partner staff members appreciated that the milestones were in line with the services they were already providing. The success of the program's implementation is a testament to CEO's central teams and the strength of its preexisting partnerships with reentry service providers.

The study findings suggest that RCS provided participants with financial relief, and participants benefited from access to structured services that helped them get back on their feet in the months following incarceration. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that this program was not designed to—nor did it—address the larger problems or harmful stereotypes that affect returning citizens. Participants made it clear that in addition to their own efforts, larger, system-level changes are needed for them to truly be set up for a successful reentry and remain free—for example, policy changes to address discriminatory practices that prevent returning citizens from getting hired or being approved to rent an apartment. Some participants the study team interviewed said that a program like RCS should become part of the criminal justice system's standard release practice, in place of the existing one-time “gate money” payment. Nearly every interviewee said that “gate money” does not offer significant support in the 30 days following incarceration. The RCS money felt like a real shot at a successful transition to them because it covered necessities such as food, clothing, and housing, and helped them prepare to enter the working world. This study shows that a reentry cash transfer program is a feasible model for the public sector to consider.

More research is needed into the effects of providing monetary support to returning citizens. While this study will attempt to conduct an exploratory analysis of the effects of RCS on criminal justice outcomes, that analysis will provide only preliminary evidence. Additional research is needed to show whether a cash transfer reentry model improves outcomes for returning citizens. Further tests could examine larger or longer-term forms of financial support.

**Appendix A**

**Intake Demographics and Payments Among  
Survey Respondents and Nonrespondents**



## Appendix Table A.1

### Baseline Characteristics and Payments Among Survey Respondents and Nonrespondents

Characteristic	Respondents	Nonrespondents
Age at enrollment	40 (11.6)	37 (12.0)***
Gender (%)		
Male	79.0	84.1***
Female	20.9	15.8***
Race (%)		
Asian	1.2	0.7
Black	59.0	64.0***
Hispanic	24.1	23.3
White	10.6	7.2***
Other/multiracial	5.1	4.9
Highest degree earned (%)		
Less than a high school diploma	21.4	29.0***
High school diploma or equivalent	53.5	54.7
Some college, no degree	19.9	13.0***
Associate's degree	2.8	1.6**
Bachelor's degree or higher	2.4	1.7
Residence type (%)		
Halfway house or three-quarter housing	13.1	10.6**
Treatment program	15.8	14.8
Private residence	50.4	47.1*
Public or subsidized housing	7.1	7.8
Shelter	8.1	10.8***
None	5.1	8.7***
Number of adults financially responsible for (%)		
0	30.2	31.3
1	62.2	61.0
2 or more	7.6	7.7

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.1 (continued)**

Characteristic	Respondents	Nonrespondents
Number of children financially responsible for (%)		
0	70.2	71.4
1	12.8	13.0
2	9.0	7.7
3	3.9	4.4
4	2.4	2.2
5 or more	1.8	1.4
Difficulty covering bills (%)		
Not difficult	1.7	1.7
A little difficult	6.1	6.2
Moderately difficult	15.6	12.4**
Very difficult	35.7	34.2
Extremely difficult	40.9	45.5**
Released from (%)		
Prison	63.9	61.4
Jail/other	36.1	38.6
Number of RCS payments received (%)		
1	4.3	8.0***
2	9.1	11.4**
3	86.5	80.7***
Total RCS amount paid (\$)	2,339	2,306
Sample size	1,084	1,674

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 until March 2021. Statistical significance levels for differences between survey respondents and nonrespondents are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, \* = 10 percent.

## Appendix Table A.2

### Baseline Characteristics and Payments Among Survey Respondents

Characteristic	All Cities	Detroit	Los Angeles	New Orleans
Age at enrollment	40 (11.6)	38 (12.2)	40 (11.4)	42 (11.4)
Gender (%)				
Male	79.0	80.4	81.0	70.5
Female	20.9	19.6	18.8	29.5
Race (%)				
Asian	1.2		1.9	
Black	59.0	88.7	41.6	90.5
Hispanic	24.1	0.5	37.5	0.5
White	10.6	9.3	12.5	5.5
Other/multiracial	5.1	1.6	6.5	3.5
Highest degree earned (%)				
Less than a high school diploma	21.4	26.3	17.6	30.0
High school diploma or equivalent	53.5	49.5	55.7	49.5
Some college, no degree	19.9	19.6	21.5	15.0
Associate's degree	2.8	2.1	3.5	1.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	2.4	2.6	1.7	4.5
Residence type (%)				
Halfway house or three-quarter housing	13.1	16.0	13.1	10.5
Treatment program	15.8	0.0	24.8	0.0
Private residence	50.4	78.9	41.9	52.0
Public or subsidized housing	7.1	1.0	7.8	10.5
Shelter	8.1	3.6	5.2	22.5
None	5.1	0.5	7.1	2.5
Number of adults financially responsible for (%)				
0	30.2	7.7	37.0	28.5
1	62.2	80.4	56.2	65.5
2 or more	7.6	11.9	6.8	6.0

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.2 (continued)**

Characteristic	All Cities	Detroit	Los Angeles	New Orleans
Number of children financially responsible for (%)				
0	70.2	53.1	77.8	60.5
1	12.8	17.5	10.5	16.5
2	9.0	10.8	7.6	12.0
3	3.9	7.7	2.0	6.5
4	2.4	6.7	1.2	2.5
5 or more	1.8	4.1	1.0	2.0
Difficulty covering bills (%)				
Not difficult	1.7	2.1	1.9	0.5
A little difficult	6.1	5.7	6.0	7.0
Moderately difficult	15.6	17.0	16.4	11.5
Very difficult	35.7	34.0	38.0	29.5
Extremely difficult	40.9	41.2	37.7	51.5
Released from (%)				
Prison	63.9	60.8	66.3	58.5
Jail/other	36.1	39.2	33.7	41.5
Number of RCS payments received (%)				
1	4.3	8.3	2.9	5.5
2	9.1	13.4	5.4	18.0
3	86.5	78.4	91.7	76.5
Total RCS amount paid (\$)	2,332	2,074	2,475	2,088
Sample size	1,084	194	690	200

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes all RCS participants who responded to at least one follow-up survey.



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## **About MDRC**

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