

Executive Summary

PAVING THE WAY HOME

An Evaluation of the
Returning Citizens
Stimulus Program

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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.

Acknowledgments

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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,¹ and millions more are released from local jails.² When incarceration ends, the men and women who are released—known as “returning citizens”—face a tough transition to the community.³ 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.⁴ 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:

¹Carson (2020).

²There 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).

³Western (2018).

⁴La 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.⁵ 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.⁶ People who are released from incarceration commonly experience housing instability and homelessness as well as difficulty obtaining employment.⁷

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.⁸ In addition, returning citizens were released during a time of skyrocketing unemployment,⁹ 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

⁵Western (2018).

⁶Visher, LaVigne, and Travis (2004).

⁷Western (2006); (2018).

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

⁹Parker, 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.¹⁰

Upon enrolling in the program, RCS participants were issued prepaid cards from a private vendor—“Skylight pay cards”—and their first payments.¹¹ 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.¹² 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

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

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

¹²The 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.¹³

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).¹⁴ 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.**

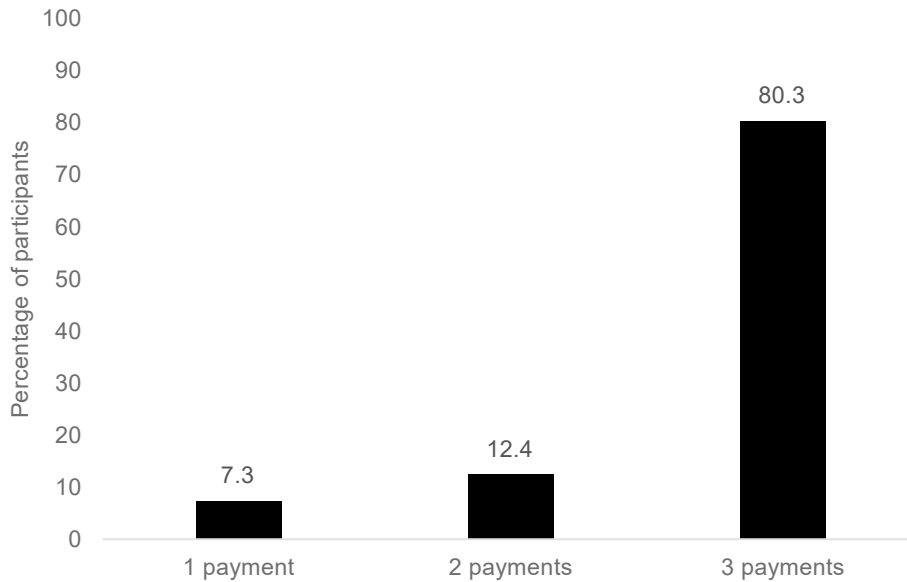
Nearly all participants said that finding employment was a high priority for them once they returned home, and that the employment-related milestones mentioned above helped them in their job searches. In interviews, some participants said that the RCS funds helped them cover transportation costs and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

¹³The 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.

¹⁴All 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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About MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.