

Building Knowledge About Successful Prisoner Reentry Strategies

MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.

Bottom Line: More than 1.5 million people are incarcerated in prisons in the United States, and about 700,000 are released each year. Former prisoners face considerable obstacles to successfully reintegrating into their communities, and many return to prison. In response to surging corrections costs and the harmful effects of large-scale incarceration on families and communities, many state and federal agencies have mounted ambitious prisoner reentry initiatives. However, while the knowledge base about effective reentry strategies is growing, there is more to learn.

What Do We Know?

A surge in incarceration. The per capita rate of prison incarceration in the U.S. has increased five-fold since 1970. Corrections costs exceed \$70 billion per year, with most of the total borne by state and local governments. With state budgets in crisis, there is general support for strategies that can reduce corrections costs without hindering public safety. In fact, several states have begun to shrink their prison populations, and the national population has leveled off. Costs of incarceration are so high that even small reductions can produce significant budget savings. For example, a recent survey of 40 states found that the average yearly cost of incarcerating one person is about \$31,000, suggesting that reducing the state prison population by only 1 percent (about 14,000 persons) would result in a savings of nearly \$450 million.

The need for successful prisoner reentry strategies. More than 95 percent of prisoners will be released back to the community, but successful transitions are rare. Ex-prisoners have difficulty securing jobs and stable housing, and they often have difficulty re-establishing relationships with their families or other social supports. In some states, former prisoners are barred from voting, receiving certain forms of public assistance, and working in specific occupations. Not surprisingly, the most recent national data show that two-thirds of ex-prisoners are rearrested, and half are re-incarcerated within three years — many for technical violations of parole conditions, rather than for new crimes.

Strategies to promote successful reentry generally receive broad support, and reducing recidivism is critical to reducing the prison population and saving money. Thus, many states and localities have established multi-agency reentry initiatives, which often begin with in-prison services that are designed to prepare inmates for the transition out of prison, followed by services provided in the community after release. Some states are also implementing changes in parole practices to support the goal of successful reentry. A large reliable body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these strategies is lacking, but some promising results are beginning to surface.

Certain employment programs for ex-prisoners may provide some short-term positive results. Employment services play a central role in many states’ reentry strategies, in part because it is critical for recently released prisoners to be engaged in productive activities. A series of rigorous random assignment studies have tested a particular employment strategy known as transitional jobs (TJ), a model that provides temporary subsidized jobs and support services to help build the employability of individuals with little or no recent work history. When targeted to former prisoners, TJ programs also provide a source of legitimate income in the critical period just after release. The evaluations have generally found

that TJ programs for ex-prisoners dramatically increase employment rates initially while people are working in the subsidized jobs. However, there is little evidence that the initial gains translate into longer-term improvements in labor market outcomes. Moreover, only one TJ model, the New York City-based Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), out of several that were tested, resulted in sustained reductions in recidivism and budget savings that more than offset the program's cost. Efforts are underway at CEO and elsewhere to redesign the "transition" to unsubsidized work in transitional jobs programs. Proponents of these programs hope that new features of the model will lead to longer-term employment gains. In addition, more analysis is underway to learn what might distinguish the CEO program from others in terms of its recidivism effects.

What's Next?

Rethinking the framework for reentry programs. There is a growing consensus that reentry strategies should build on a framework known as Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR). The RNR approach helps corrections agencies target resources to those offenders who are at higher risk of recidivism and provide individualized services to address behaviors and circumstances associated with crime. These services often include forms of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that address values and thinking patterns that are seen as favorable to crime. The evidence supporting the RNR framework and the CBT models is not based on large-scale tests with rigorous research designs, but there are hints from other studies, some rigorous, that these principles can work in practice.

Other research is also underway in the reentry field, focusing on programs that seek to improve family relationships, provide drug treatment, or other services. Some studies look specifically at the practices of supervision agencies (for example, probation or parole). One particularly promising model, called Hawaii Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE), uses swift and certain, but generally mild, sanctions for noncompliance, such as failed drug tests. This program was tested on a small scale with a random assignment design and achieved very positive results. It is being replicated and tested in several other sites by the National Institute of Justice.

Increased federal support for identifying successful reentry strategies. A number of federal agencies are simultaneously mounting reentry initiatives focusing on different strategies. For example the U.S. Department of Labor is running two large demonstration projects to improve employment outcomes of the formerly incarcerated. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Justice is planning or currently running projects focused on changing practices within the criminal justice system to improve recidivism outcomes. A Federal Interagency Reentry Council, established by Attorney General Holder in January 2011, consists of 20 federal agencies and meets periodically to address the range of issues facing prisoners returning to communities.

Some of the current reentry initiatives include rigorous evaluations, which will help to build evidence about the effectiveness of the various reentry strategies. It also is important to confirm that promising strategies can be implemented effectively within large, real-world corrections systems. Solid evidence that reentry programs are effective at reducing recidivism and improving outcomes for former prisoners will make it easier to sustain support and funding for these services at scale when state and local budgets are tight. As states and localities build these programs on the foundational work described above, we will have the opportunity to document effects at scale.