

Employment-Focused Programs for Ex-Prisoners

**What have we learned, what are we learning,
and where should we go from here?**

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What Do We Know and What Do We Want to Know?”
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Overview

Each year, more than 600,000 people are released from prison. The obstacles to successful reentry are daunting, starting with the challenge of finding stable work. Indeed, a large proportion of released inmates return to prison within a relatively short time. In recognition of the enormous human and financial toll of recidivism, there is new interest among researchers, community advocates, and public officials in prisoner reentry initiatives, particularly those focused on employment.

In May 2006, the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan hosted a meeting — “Research on Prisoner Reentry: What Do We Know and What Do We Want to Know?” — to discuss the state of research on employment-focused prisoner reentry programs. This paper, written as background for the meeting, reviews previous research, describes some planned or ongoing evaluations, and proposes some ideas for future research.

There have been few rigorous studies of employment-focused reentry models, and there is a pressing need for more definitive evidence of what works. A meta-analysis of eight random assignment design studies of postrelease community-based programs found that they did not reduce recidivism. There are only a few experimental studies on the effects of in-prison services, and it is hard to draw lessons from the nonexperimental research. Many experts believe that the most promising reentry models provide coordinated services both before and after inmates are released. There have been a few studies of such models to date, including two that used random assignment; the results were only somewhat positive.

It is clearly difficult to increase employment and earnings for disadvantaged men. Yet the results described above do not support the view that “nothing works.” Some programs seem to be modestly successful: those for older ex-prisoners, integrated services both before and after release, and perhaps models using financial incentives. Further attention to design and evaluation of prisoner reentry programs may produce useful results, as most of the studies are quite old, and both the economic and criminal justice contexts have changed dramatically in recent years.

Some large-scale studies now under way will dramatically expand the knowledge base, but some important gaps will remain. Approaches that might be tested in the future include: earnings supplements and work incentives; employer-focused strategies, such as the federal bonding program and supported placements to give employers incentives to hire ex-prisoners; in-prison vocational training; performance goals for parole officers that emphasize parolees’ employment; and programs that address motivational issues, such as faith-based initiatives, therapeutic models, and those that engage ex-prisoners’ families.

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Introduction

In May 2006, the National Poverty Center (NPC) at the University of Michigan hosted a meeting to discuss the state of research on employment-focused prisoner reentry programs. This paper, written as background for the meeting, reviews the extent and quality of previous research and the results of key studies, describes several planned or ongoing evaluations that will add to the knowledge base, and proposes some ideas for future research.

The NPC meeting reflected the current interest in prisoner reentry on the part of researchers, community advocates, and public officials. This stems from the growing recognition that hundreds of thousands of prisoners jailed during the surge in incarceration of the last two decades are now being released and returned to their communities, particularly to communities of color. Localities, states, and the federal government have begun to design and fund new reentry initiatives.

This is obviously good news, but in all the excitement it is easy to overlook the fact that we know very little about what works in improving reentry outcomes. As discussed below, few rigorous evaluations have been completed and even fewer have yielded any positive results. Thus, the key goals of the NPC meeting were: 1) to reach some consensus about what we already know; 2) to understand what we will learn from ongoing or planned studies; 3) to discuss a strategy for synthesizing and disseminating emerging findings; and 4) to consider an agenda for additional research to fill key gaps in the knowledge base.

Clearly, any discussion of “what we know” — about anything — hinges on the standard of evidence applied. It is worth noting up front that this paper displays a strong bias in favor of studies that use experimental designs (and not only because the author works for an organization that specializes in such studies).

Many experts in the reentry field have argued that motivation plays a critical role in success for both individuals and programs.¹ This certainly seems plausible, and probably applies in other fields as well. But, if success is strongly associated with motivation, it is hard to put much stock in studies that attempt to measure program impacts by comparing outcomes for people who choose to participate in employment programs with outcomes for those who don't. After all, it is easy to control for criminal history, age, or education level, but very difficult to measure or control for motivation. In reading numerous research reviews and meta-analyses of reentry studies, it is notable that the papers with more positive conclusions usually rely more heavily on results from nonexperimental studies.

¹See, for example, Bushway (2003).

That said, it is clear that random assignment experiments are not always feasible, appropriate, or affordable. This paper describes several nonexperimental studies that are widely cited in the field.

The Rationale for Employment-Focused Reentry Programs

The audience for the upcoming meeting understands well the magnitude and consequences of the prisoner reentry problem. Suffice it to say that more than 600,000 people are released from incarceration each year, that these individuals are disproportionately returning to a relatively small number of distressed communities, and that the best available evidence indicates that successful transitions are far too rare. The human and financial costs of recidivism are enormous.

Although the relationship between crime and employment is complex, most experts seem to agree on a few things. First, a large proportion of former prisoners have low levels of education and work experience, health problems, and other personal characteristics that make them hard to employ, particularly in a labor market that offers fewer and fewer well-paying opportunities for individuals who lack postsecondary education. For example, 40 percent of inmates in state and federal prisons have neither a high school diploma nor a GED, 31 percent of state inmates have a “physical impairment or mental condition,” and 57 percent report that they used drugs in the month before their arrest.²

Second, the increase in incarceration over the past 25 years has disproportionately affected African-American men. One study found that, among black men born between 1965 and 1969, 30 percent of those without a college education and a startling 60 percent of high school dropouts had served time in prison by 1999.³ Several recent studies have documented the labor market struggles of African-American men even during the 1990s boom⁴ and the persistent discrimination they face in the job market.⁵

Third, while it is very difficult to isolate the impact of incarceration on labor market outcomes, several studies have found that earnings — and possibly employment as well — are lower for individuals who have spent time in prison than for similar individuals who have not.⁶

²Solomon et al. (2004).

³Petit and Western (2004).

⁴Mincy, Lewis, and Han (2006).

⁵Pager and Western (2005).

⁶Western, Kling, and Weiman (2001).

This is not surprising, since convicted felons are legally barred from certain occupations (including many in fast-growing sectors) and because employers are very reluctant to hire them.⁷

In sum, many people enter the criminal justice system hard to employ and leave it even harder to employ. Not surprisingly, employment rates for ex-prisoners are typically low. For example, in a survey of male prisoners returning to Chicago, only 44 percent reported that they worked for at least a week in the first four to eight months following their release from prison, and many of those who worked did not work full time.⁸ A similar survey in Baltimore found that 64 percent worked within six months after their release, but again many worked part time or sporadically.⁹ An analysis using unemployment insurance data from the State of Florida found that only about 40 percent of former state prisoners were working in a UI-covered job one year after release.¹⁰

Of course, the fact that ex-prisoners tend to struggle in the labor market and frequently end up back in prison does not necessarily mean that employment will reduce recidivism. After all, most offenders are employed at the time of their arrest.¹¹ But there are both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence to support the notion that crime is linked to unemployment, low earnings, or job instability.¹² Legitimate employment may reduce the economic incentive to commit crimes, and also may connect ex-prisoners to more positive social networks and daily routines. Qualitative data also suggest that finding a job is the highest priority for prisoners upon release.¹³ In short, it is reasonable to hypothesize that interventions that boost employment and earnings among ex-prisoners will also reduce recidivism.

The Quantity and Quality of Previous Research

There is a long history of research in the criminal justice field, including many experimental evaluations. For example, a recent review identified 83 random assignment studies between 1982 and 2004 that measured criminal justice outcomes.¹⁴ However, there appear to have been few rigorous studies of employment-focused reentry models. For example:

⁷Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2003); Pager (2003).

⁸Kachnowski (2005).

⁹Visher, Kachnowski, La Vigne, and Travis (2004).

¹⁰Tyler and Kling (2004).

¹¹According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 57 percent and 76 percent of state prison inmates (depending on educational attainment) had wage income in the month before they were incarcerated. Between 48 percent and 70 percent reported that they were working full time.

¹²Bernstein and Houston (2000); Urban Institute Justice Policy Center (2006); Sampson and Laub (2005).

¹³Nelson, Deess, and Allen (1999).

¹⁴Farrington and Welsh (2005).

- A recent meta-analysis of the effects of “community employment programs on recidivism among persons who have previously been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated” found only eight such studies that used random assignment designs. The authors note that “this systematic review...is hampered by inadequate contemporary research.”¹⁵
- An earlier meta-analysis of evaluations of “corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs for adult offenders” found a total of 33 studies, but only two of them used random assignment designs and a third used what the authors considered to be a strong nonexperimental design. The authors concluded that “the methodological soundness of the...research in this area is poor and limits the ability of this synthesis to draw causal inferences...”¹⁶
- A third review of “prisoner reentry programs” examined 32 studies and ranked their methodological strength on a scale from 1 to 5. Only two studies were assigned to Level 5, indicating that they used random assignment. (One of the two was excluded from the first review cited above because the authors concluded that the design was “compromised.”) An additional 14 studies were ranked at Level 4, designating a strong nonexperimental design. (Eight of the Level 4 studies focused on drug treatment programs.)

Thus, the first important conclusion is that we don’t know very much for certain, and the second is that there is a pressing need for more definitive evidence. One might look to the welfare system for support for the second conclusion. During the 1980s, a series of well-designed random assignment studies provided unusually solid evidence that mandatory welfare-to-work programs generate modest but policy-relevant increases in employment and some corresponding reductions in welfare receipt.¹⁷ Today, no one seriously questions the assumption that it is necessary to invest public funds in employment services for welfare recipients.

In recent years, thanks to the work of Jeremy Travis and others,¹⁸ policymakers and the public have begun to focus on the prisoner reentry issue, and there is a renewed willingness to spend some money on rehabilitation services. This surge of interest could easily dissipate, however, without solid evidence that these services make a difference. After all, there is significant underlying skepticism about the efficacy of rehabilitation efforts. On the positive side, the reentry field has a built-in advantage over the welfare field: Incarceration costs are so high that even small reductions in recidivism could easily produce budgetary savings that outweigh the cost of services.

¹⁵Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall (2005).

¹⁶Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie (2000).

¹⁷See, for example, Gueron and Pauly (1991).

¹⁸Travis (2005).

The Results

What has been learned from the rigorous studies that have been completed? Is there good evidence that employment programs are effective for former prisoners? Are there programs that have reduced recidivism? This section briefly discusses the study results, focusing on three types of employment-focused programs: postrelease (that is, community-based) programs, in-prison programs, and programs that provide services both before and after prisoners are released. The review focuses on programs for adults or, in a few cases, older youth.

Postrelease (Community-Based) Programs

It makes sense to start with the research review that most directly addresses the topic of the upcoming meeting —“Ex-Offender Employment Programs and Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis” by Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall.¹⁹ As noted earlier, this review included only studies that used random assignment designs.

Five of the eight programs discussed in the review specifically targeted ex-prisoners: the Living Insurance for Ex-Prisoners (LIFE) project, the Transitional Aid Research Project (TARP), the National Supported Work Demonstration, and a study of job training for probationers — all from the 1970s — plus the more recent Opportunity to Succeed project.

The review also included three studies of programs that were not designed specifically for former prisoners but identified them as a subgroup and also collected data on criminal justice outcomes — JOBSTART, the Job Corps, and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) evaluation.

The studies examined a diverse set of program models. The LIFE and TARP projects assessed various combinations of financial payments (essentially unemployment insurance payments) and job search assistance. The Supported Work programs provided temporary wage-paying jobs and subjected participants to gradually increasing performance expectations. The Opportunity to Succeed program, which targeted ex-prisoners with alcohol and drug offenses, offered a variety of employment-oriented services in the context of strong case management. The other four programs provided various kinds of education and/or vocational training — the Job Corps did so in a residential setting.

The meta-analysis concluded that the programs did not reduce recidivism. However, it seems important to consider whether this was because the programs did not succeed in increasing employment, or because employment gains did not lead to lower recidivism.²⁰

¹⁹Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall (2005).

²⁰Another meta-analysis published at around the same time (Aos, Miller, and Drake, 2006) included many of the same studies, but concluded that “community-based employment training, job search, and job

In some cases — for example, the JTPA evaluation, which studied fairly low-intensity employment and training programs — it seems clear that the programs did not increase earnings for youth (recidivism was not measured for adults). Thus, it is not surprising that these programs failed to reduce recidivism.²¹

There is more sobering evidence on this point from the National Supported Work Demonstration. As expected, Supported Work generated very large increases in employment during the early months of the follow-up period, when program participants were in subsidized jobs. (The increases faded once people left subsidized jobs.) But even with a 30 to 50 percentage point impact on employment, there was no impact on arrests: About one-third of each research group was arrested during the first nine months after study entry.²² This finding offers additional evidence that the relationship between crime and employment is not straightforward.

Although there are no obvious patterns — for example, evidence that one type of program model is more effective than another — there are several interesting nuggets buried in the studies included in this review:

- The LIFE study found that weekly payments generated a small but statistically significant reduction in arrests for theft. The authors of the TARP study concluded that the payments reduced arrests but also reduced employment.²³ This raises the intriguing question, discussed further below, of whether financial incentives that do not reduce the incentive to work might produce different results.
- The Job Corps generated statistically significant reductions in arrests and convictions over a 48-month follow-up period.²⁴ As might be expected, the impacts were largest during the period when participants were in the residential program. However, there was no statistically significant impact on arrests

assistance programs for adult offenders...produce a modest but statistically significant reduction in recidivism.” It is not clear why this study reached a different conclusion, but it is worth noting that, unlike Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall’s, this analysis included studies that did not use random assignment designs.

²¹The Job Training Partnership Act study found that the programs did not increase earnings for either male or female youth. The subgroup of male youth with a previous arrest may have experienced a significant *loss* in earnings as a result of the programs. (Two data sources tell different stories for this subgroup.) There were no impacts on subsequent arrests for male youth who had been arrested before they enrolled, but the programs appeared to increase arrests for male youth who had no prior arrests (Orr et al., 1996; Bloom et al., 1996).

²²Piliavin and Gartner (1981).

²³Rossi, Berk, and Lenihan (1980).

²⁴The final report from the Job Corps study found that impacts on employment and earnings disappeared after the 48-month period. The study did not collect longer-term data on arrests (Schochet, McConnell, and Burghardt, 2003).

for sample members who had been arrested before they enrolled — the group most relevant to a reentry discussion.²⁵

- The authors of the Supported Work study note that impacts on both employment and criminal justice outcomes were somewhat more positive for older sample members (over 25), a finding that was also reported by Uggen, who reanalyzed the data to examine impacts by age.²⁶ (Results for the LIFE program were also stronger for older participants.)

In several cases, the studies found fairly large differences between experimental and control groups in criminal justice-related outcomes, but the differences were not statistically significant, possibly because sample sizes were very small. For example, in the JOBSTART study, a subgroup analysis for males with a previous arrest found a 6 percentage point decrease in arrests during the four-year follow-up period (75 percent for the control group versus 69 percent for the experimental group). However, the difference was not significant (there were only 236 people in this subgroup).²⁷ Similarly, the study of job training for probationers, with a total sample of only 216 people, found a 7 percentage point decrease in negative criminal justice outcomes that was not significant. These results point to the importance of avoiding underpowered studies, particularly since it seems fair to assume that even successful programs will not produce very large impacts on criminal justice outcomes.

One additional study should be mentioned, though it did not meet the criteria set by Visher, Winterfield, and Coggeshall. The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration (PFS) provided employment services to noncustodial parents of children on welfare. These parents were unemployed and unable to meet their child support obligations. Although the study did not examine subgroup results for ex-prisoners, almost 70 percent of the research sample had a previous conviction. PFS did not increase employment overall, but had some modest impacts for less employable subgroups, such as people with no high school diploma or little recent work history.²⁸ An unpublished analysis shows that PFS had no impact on arrests after enrollment.

²⁵Schochet, Burghardt, and Glazerman (2001).

²⁶Uggen (2000).

²⁷JOBSTART was intended to be a nonresidential version of the Job Corps. It targeted 17- to 21-year-old high school dropouts who had low reading levels, and provided a mix of education, vocational training, support services, and job placement help. For males with a previous arrest, the program group's earnings were higher than the control group's, but again the difference was not significant. See Cave, Bos, Doolittle, and Toussaint (1993).

²⁸Martinez and Miller (2000).

Prison-Based Programs

It is plausible that providing work opportunities, education, or vocational training to inmates might improve their postrelease employment outcomes and decrease recidivism. Prison-based education and training fell out of favor in many places in the 1980s and 1990s, and recent surveys by the Urban Institute show that relatively few prisoners receive employment-related training.²⁹ More than half of prisoners have a work assignment, although these are mostly institutional maintenance assignments.³⁰

Unfortunately, there are few experimental studies on the effects of prison-based services, and it is hard to draw clear lessons from the nonexperimental research. As noted earlier, Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie conducted a meta-analysis of studies of corrections-based programs and concluded that inmates who participated in these programs had lower rates of recidivism than those who did not.³¹ But the authors noted that almost all of the study designs were so weak that they could not attribute the difference in recidivism to the programs that were studied. Reviewing some of the same studies, Seiter and Kadela concluded that prison-based education programs do not reduce recidivism but that vocational and work programs do.³² A third meta-analysis, also including many of the same studies, concluded that in-prison correctional industries programs and basic adult education programs in prison lead to reductions in recidivism; the evidence on vocational education in prison was deemed less definitive.³³

One nonexperimental study often described as having used more sophisticated techniques to control for selection bias is the Post Release Employment Project.³⁴ The authors identified inmates who had participated in industrial work or had received vocational instruction or apprenticeship training and compared them with nonparticipants released during the same period, using statistical techniques to control for measurable characteristics. One year after release, 6.6 percent of participants, compared with 10.1 percent of nonparticipants, had been rearrested or committed a technical parole violation, a difference that is statistically significant (the total sample included over 7,000 people). Harrer also found that participation in prison-based education is associated with lower recidivism among federal prisoners.³⁵

Although they did not measure recidivism, Tyler and Kling used unemployment insurance earnings records to measure the impact of prison-based GED programs in Florida.³⁶ They had a rich set of background characteristics to use as statistical controls. They found that

²⁹Urban Institute Justice Policy Center (2006).

³⁰Atkinson and Rostad (2003).

³¹Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie (2000).

³²Seiter and Kadela (2003).

³³Aos, Miller, and Drake (2006).

³⁴Saylor and Gaes (1996).

³⁵Harrer (1994).

³⁶Tyler and Kling (2004).

participation in GED programs is associated with modest, short-term earnings gains for minority offenders.

Finally, though the result is puzzling, it is worth noting that a quasi-experimental evaluation of Project Greenlight, a prerelease program in New York City that provided instruction in job readiness, substance abuse relapse prevention, basic living skills, cognitive skills training, homelessness prevention, and release planning, found that participants had higher rates of recidivism than did members of a comparison group.³⁷

Programs That Combine Prerelease and Postrelease Services

Many experts believe that the most promising reentry models provide coordinated pre-release and postrelease services. This approach is being tested in the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, discussed further below.³⁸ There have been a few studies of such models to date, including two that used random assignment.

Lattimore, Witte, and Baker evaluated a job training and placement program for 18- to 22-year-old property offenders.³⁹ The program included integrated pre- and postrelease services, including an initial assessment of vocational aptitudes and interests, appropriate vocational training before release, and job search/job placement assistance. Although there was a relatively small difference between the experimental and control groups in service receipt (both because most experimental group members did not receive the full service package and because many control group members received part of the package), the program nonetheless produced a 10 percentage point decrease in subsequent arrests that was (barely) statistically significant.

Turner and Petersilia⁴⁰ used random assignment to assess the impacts of work release in the state of Washington (this study might have been categorized as a prison-based model).⁴¹ Arrests during work release were rare and, over a 12-month follow-up period, individuals who were assigned to work release were somewhat less likely to be arrested than those who had remained in prison longer, but the difference was not statistically significant.⁴² (A nonexperimen-

³⁷Wilson et al. (2005).

³⁸Lattimore et al. (2004).

³⁹Lattimore, Witte, and Baker (1990).

⁴⁰Turner and Petersilia (1996).

⁴¹Although the study used random assignment, the researchers were forced to supplement the control group with additional cases that were not selected through the random assignment process.

⁴²For the work release group, the 12-month follow-up period typically included about two months in prison before the work release placement, seven months in work release, and three months postrelease. For the nonwork release group, the period included about five months in prison and seven months postrelease. Thus, the nonwork release group was exposed to arrest for a somewhat shorter time. During the 12-month follow-up, 30 percent of the nonwork release group was arrested, compared with 22 percent of the work release group.

tal study by Harer also found that federal inmates released through halfway houses were more likely to work and, as a result, less likely to be rearrested or have their parole revoked.)⁴³

Another frequently cited study⁴⁴ examined a large-scale Texas reentry program called Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders), which provides services both before and after prisoners are released. Before prisoners are released, staff help them develop an employment plan, secure necessary official documents, learn how to behave in interviews, and develop life skills. After their release, participants receive job placement help. A nonexperimental study found that RIO participants were more likely than nonparticipants to work. It also found that, among high-risk offenders, RIO participants were less likely than nonparticipants to be rearrested (48 percent versus 57 percent) and reincarcerated (23 percent versus 38 percent). The authors of the study controlled for measurable factors but cautioned that they could not control for unobservable factors such as motivation.

Conclusions

Taken as a whole, these results are not especially encouraging. It is clearly very difficult to increase employment and earnings for disadvantaged men, and there is mixed evidence about whether increasing employment for ex-prisoners leads to reductions in recidivism.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to believe that further attention to design and evaluation of prisoner reentry programs may produce useful results. First, most of the studies are quite old, and both the economic and the criminal justice contexts have changed dramatically in the past 20 to 30 years. The prison population and the nature of in-prison programming and postrelease supervision are all quite different. At the same time, labor market opportunities for released prisoners are probably worse today. In short, it is reasonable to assume that reentry programs could have quite different results today than they did in the 1970s.

Second, while undeniably discouraging, the results described above do not support the view that “nothing works.” Some programs appear to be modestly successful and, while there are few clear patterns in the results, there are hints of success for older offenders, for programs that provide integrated services both before and after release, and perhaps for models using financial incentives.

That said, the evidence also does not appear to support the conclusion, commonly found in recent reports by some advocates of reentry programs, that we already know what works. As most of the promising findings are from studies that did not use experimental designs, it is hard to know how much stock to put in those results. Thus, there is a clear need for more definitive

⁴³Harer (1994).

⁴⁴Menon, Blakely, and Carmichael (1992); Finn (1998).

evidence, both to make a more persuasive case for continued funding and, just as important, to guide the design of future programs.

Current Studies

Fortunately, the recent surge of interest in prisoner reentry has triggered some new research that should help to build the knowledge base. Three large-scale studies that will be described at the meeting are:

- **The Serious and Violent Offenders Reentry Initiative (SVORI).** This is a \$100 million federal initiative led by the U.S. Department of Justice. Grants were provided to all states, and the programs funded under this initiative provide a wide range of prerelease and postrelease services. RTI International and the Urban Institute are conducting an evaluation, which includes an impact analysis at about 15 sites, including some that use an experimental design.⁴⁵
- **The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Evaluation.** CEO is one the nation's largest and most highly regarded employment programs for ex-offenders. It uses a transitional employment model that places participants in work crews within one week after enrollment, and pays them daily for the hours they work. Staff identify problematic workplace behaviors and try to resolve them, and then help participants find regular jobs. As part of the Hard-to-Employ evaluation funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, MDRC, in partnership with the Urban Institute, is evaluating the CEO program using a random assignment design. In 2004 and 2005, nearly 1,000 parolees who showed up at CEO were assigned to receive either the core CEO program or a limited job search assistance model, also run by CEO.
- **The Joyce Foundation's Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration.** The Joyce Foundation is about to launch a four-site random assignment evaluation of programs that use transitional employment to serve recently released offenders. The programs will operate within the foundation's midwestern grantmaking area. MDRC, the Urban Institute, and the University of Michigan have been selected to conduct the evaluation.

Other ongoing and planned studies may also be discussed at the upcoming meeting, including:

⁴⁵Lattimore et al. (2004).

- The Urban Institute and the Safer Foundation in Chicago are designing a community-based reentry demonstration program.
- The U.S. Department of Labor has announced that it intends to conduct a random assignment evaluation as part of the Prisoner Reentry Initiative, which focuses on employment, housing, and mentoring for nonviolent offenders.⁴⁶
- Public/Private Ventures is planning a random assignment evaluation of the prisoner reentry program run by America Works in New York City. America Works typically places its participants directly into private sector jobs, but the participants remain on America Works' payroll and receive supports during a trial period. This model has been used for many years with welfare recipients.⁴⁷

The Second Chance Act, a bill introduced into the House and Senate with bipartisan sponsorship that aims to reduce recidivism, increase public safety, and help states and communities better address the growing population of ex-offenders returning to communities, includes funding and requirements for evaluation. (The Senate version, S. 1934, includes language favoring random assignment designs.)

With several strong studies in progress or planned, it might be useful to spend some time at the NPC meeting discussing strategies for synthesizing the emerging results, drawing appropriate lessons for policy, and disseminating the lessons to policymakers and administrators.

Filling the Gaps: What Other Approaches Should Be Tested?

Although the studies just described will dramatically expand the knowledge base about employment-focused reentry programs, some important gaps will remain. This section describes a few approaches that might be tested in the future.

Earnings Supplements

In addition to having difficulty finding jobs in the formal labor market, ex-prisoners who work tend to have very low earnings. In part, this reflects larger structural changes — for example, declines in the manufacturing sector — that have depressed wages for men who lack postsecondary education. Low wages and low employment may be linked — low wages may reduce the incentive for former prisoners to work in the formal labor market — and low earnings may also contribute directly to recidivism.

⁴⁶U.S. Department of Labor (2005).

⁴⁷Eimicke and Cohen (2002).

As noted earlier, the 1970s LIFE and TARP projects suggested that financial payments to ex-prisoners may reduce arrests, but those payments were structured in ways that may have discouraged work. This raises the question of whether payments designed to encourage work might have stronger results. Earnings supplements have been shown to increase employment among welfare recipients⁴⁸ and could be tested among an ex-offender population. Such a test would help to determine the extent to which low earnings are a key factor contributing to recidivism.

There have been several proposals for work incentives that might benefit former prisoners. Edelman, Holzer, and Offner offer three alternatives: a wage subsidy for all low-wage workers, an expanded earned income tax credit (EITC) for workers who are not custodial parents (both noncustodial parents and nonparents), and a special EITC for low-wage noncustodial parents who are meeting their child support obligations.⁴⁹ Primus suggests similar approaches.⁵⁰ Governor George Pataki of New York has proposed a special state earned income tax credit for low-income noncustodial parents who pay their child support.

Although none of these proposals is designed specifically for ex-prisoners, they would all likely benefit them. A narrower and cheaper, though arguably more controversial, approach would be a temporary reentry supplement — a monthly payment to released prisoners who work full time in the formal labor market and have no arrests or parole violations. The benefit might last up to three years, with the amount gradually decreasing over time (for example, \$200 a month in the first year, \$100 a month in the second year, and \$50 a month in the third year).⁵¹

It would obviously be difficult politically to target earnings supplements specifically to former prisoners, but the notion may not be as far fetched as it seems. Earned income disregards in the welfare system, now used in most states, target earnings supplements to single mothers on welfare, hardly a popular group. More directly, the Center for Employment Opportunities (described earlier), a major employment program for former prisoners, has begun a Rapid Rewards Program that provides bonus payments to program graduates who return to CEO with a pay stub. Participants can receive over \$500 in noncash rewards over a 12-month period. The program was originally designed to assist CEO's job retention tracking, but it may also affect employment behavior.

To justify a larger test of this approach, one might argue that the residual affects of incarceration on employment and earnings are a “collateral sanction” that is not part of a prisoner's original sentence, and that society would benefit by helping former prisoners gain their

⁴⁸Berlin (2000).

⁴⁹Edelman, Holzer, and Offner (2006).

⁵⁰Primus (2006).

⁵¹The amount might also be tied to earnings; that is, people who earn more would receive a smaller benefit.

footing in the labor market. Of course, like most of the other strategies discussed so far, approaches based on financial incentives stem from an economic model that assumes people with more money will commit fewer crimes. As discussed further below, if the most salient factors are not economic but cultural or psychological, this approach will have limited success.

Employer-Focused Strategies

Many studies have documented employers' reluctance to hire individuals with criminal records. African-American ex-prisoners face a double dose of employment discrimination. Tax credits are already in place to reward employers who hire former prisoners, but the research on whether such credits change employer hiring practices is not encouraging.⁵² Other strategies might be used to address this problem more directly:

- **Bonding.** The federal bonding program should make employers who are concerned about theft more likely to hire ex-prisoners. The bonding program offers fidelity bonds to anyone who is not eligible for commercial bonding. Research is needed to better understand how extensively the program is used, whether its administration could be improved, and whether it affects hiring decisions. (If employers are reluctant to hire ex-prisoners because they think they will be unreliable employees, the bond will not make much difference.)
- **OJT/Supported Placements.** Unlike the transitional employment model used by CEO and others, this model places participants directly with private employers who have job openings. It uses a number of different strategies to give the employer an incentive to hire the individual or reduce the risk involved. Under an On the Job Training (OJT) model, the employer receives a subsidy for the first several months of employment.⁵³ In an alternative approach, used by America Works, the employee remains on the employment program's payroll during a trial period and receives support from program staff.⁵⁴

Finally, it may be worth considering some experimentation with policies to expunge criminal records or pardon ex-offenders, which vary considerably from state to state. If employers' unwillingness to hire people with criminal records is indeed a serious barrier, then ex-

⁵²Hamersma (2005).

⁵³As with tax credits, there are questions about whether On the Job Training subsidies actually affect employer hiring decisions or simply provide a windfall to employers who would hire ex-prisoners anyway.

⁵⁴A related model, Individual Placement and Support (IPS), designed for people with disabilities, has had large impacts on earnings and employment compared with other program models, including preemployment training and transitional work. IPS is a work-first approach that relies on rapid placement in unsubsidized jobs, coupled with postemployment supports and accommodations (Bond, Becker, and Mueser, 1999).

prisoners' prospects might be improved if their records were expunged. Perhaps a state might be willing to experiment with a more liberal or expedited expungement or pardon policy, for example, for individuals who have never committed a violent offense.

Education and Training Strategies

As discussed earlier, even if they are successful in finding jobs, most former prisoners will earn very low wages. This may be partly attributable to their incarceration, but the larger issue is that relatively few well-paying jobs are available for people with low levels of education and skills. The earnings supplementation strategies discussed above are designed to address this problem, but it is also worth considering whether any specific education and training strategies should be tested among former prisoners.

Unfortunately, studies of general job training programs for low-income populations — many of which were discussed earlier — do not point to many promising models for men. Similarly, in the welfare system, there is little evidence that education and training-based strategies raise earnings more than strategies based on rapid employment — although these studies mostly tested programs that *required* recipients to attend basic education programs whether they wanted to or not.⁵⁵ And, of course, there is a practical problem: Most former prisoners need to work a lot to make ends meet, leaving little additional time for education or training.

The most obvious strategy is to make better use of the time individuals spend in prison. While somewhat promising, the studies cited earlier provide little solid evidence that prison-based training makes a difference, and little is known about the quality of the training. Thus, an explicit test of a strong prison-based vocational training program, linked to jobs in a high-growth sector, might be considered. As with the earnings supplement proposal described earlier, some might raise equity concerns about providing better vocational training to prisoners than is typically available to low-income individuals with no criminal record.

System Reforms

Most of this paper has focused on program models rather than on the systems in which they operate. For example, the paper does not address whether employment services for ex-prisoners should operate within the context of the criminal justice system or the broader workforce development system.

The paper also has not discussed the parole system, which sets the context for most community-based reentry programs. Petersilia⁵⁶ describes how parole workers' caseloads have

⁵⁵Hamilton (2002).

⁵⁶Petersilia (2003).

grown, and how the system has increasingly focused on surveillance and monitoring rather than services to help prisoners reenter the community.⁵⁷ Indeed, one-third of prison admissions are for parole violations. A recent study found that parole supervision has little impact on rearrest rates of released prisoners.⁵⁸

It is possible that reentry outcomes could be improved without directly changing parole practices. Many early welfare-to-work initiatives grafted employment services onto the welfare system without attempting to change the day-to-day practices of welfare eligibility workers, even though some of those practices were seen as discouraging employment.

But many experts in the field believe that parole could be improved, and have developed specific recommendations for better practices.⁵⁹ Previous studies suggest that simply lowering caseloads and increasing the intensity of monitoring will probably not produce better outcomes. In fact, it will likely increase the number of violations discovered (studies of lower caseworker caseloads in the welfare system have found a similar result). But other changes might produce better results. Clearly some reforms are systemic efforts that are not easily testable, but others might lend themselves to evaluation. For example, what if a study systematically varied performance goals for parole officers, with officers in the “experimental group” subject to targets that emphasized employment and successful completion of parole?

Beyond Work

Many have argued that work-oriented programs by themselves are not likely to generate significant reductions in recidivism. For example, Piehl concludes that “work may be necessary, but for most inmates it will not be sufficient.”⁶⁰ Indeed, many of the programs funded under the SVORI provide mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, and assistance with housing, and some of the strongest evidence of reduced recidivism comes from evaluations of substance abuse treatment programs. Seiter and Kadela identified studies of 12 reentry programs that emphasized drug rehabilitation and concluded that “drug treatment programs do work in easing the transition from prison to the community.”⁶¹ An experimental evaluation of a prison therapeutic community and aftercare program for substance abusers in San Diego also found reductions in recidivism.⁶²

It may be that programs need to do more than provide services to address specific barriers. Bushway and Reuter note that employment programs must work against the powerful

⁵⁷Petersilia (2003).

⁵⁸Solomon (2006).

⁵⁹See, for example, Reentry Policy Council (2005).

⁶⁰Piehl (2003).

⁶¹Seiter and Kadela (2003).

⁶²Wexler et al. (1999).

forces of peer pressure and community norms that militate against steady work in the formal labor market, and conclude that programs “need to address the social and psychological issues confronting the communities and individuals they intend to help.”⁶³ Similarly, Bushway argues that work programs are “only helpful for people who are ready and willing to exit from a life of crime. . .if we want to serve young males or others heavily embedded in crime, we have to focus on motivating individuals to change rather than simply providing skills or a job.”⁶⁴

If these observations are correct, programs may need to address profound motivational issues. Bushway describes the Jobs Corps, with its intensive residential model, as one promising approach — although, as noted earlier, the Jobs Corps did not reduce arrest rates among individuals who had been arrested before they enrolled in the program.

Others argue for faith-based initiatives, citing evidence of an inverse correlation between crime and religious faith, and some nonexperimental evaluation results suggest that faith-based programs can reduce recidivism.⁶⁵ The 11-site Ready4Work initiative, managed by Public/Private Ventures, combines job training and placement, mentoring, and case management; faith-based organizations play key roles in most sites. An initial report on the project noted that “job training and placement may not be enough, particularly for offenders who have become ‘embedded’ in criminality.”⁶⁶

Another approach would rely more heavily on therapeutic models such as Multisystemic Therapy that have proved effective in reducing reincarceration among juvenile offenders.⁶⁷

Finally, some argue that a family-focused approach is needed, citing evidence that strong family ties are associated with lower recidivism. The New York City-based La Bodega de la Familia targets drug users in the criminal justice system using an approach that explicitly engages the participants’ families. A nonexperimental evaluation conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice found that program participants reduced their drug use more than individuals in a comparison group. Interestingly, the researchers concluded that participants reduced their drug use not because they made greater use of drug treatment services but rather because family members and staff pressured and supported them.⁶⁸

Given the generally discouraging results of evaluations of employment programs, it would be prudent to expand the scope of future research to include other approaches.

⁶³Bushway and Reuter (2001).

⁶⁴Bushway (2003).

⁶⁵U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, no date; Prison Fellowship Web site.

⁶⁶Good and Sherrid (2005).

⁶⁷Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy.

⁶⁸Sullivan et al. (2002).

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

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- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.