

## MOVING MEN INTO THE MAINSTREAM: BEST PRACTICES IN PRISONER REENTRY ASSISTANCE

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On July 23, 2007, two felons recently released from prison robbed and torched a Connecticut doctor's house, holding hostage, sexually assaulting, and eventually killing his wife and two daughters.<sup>1</sup> The distraught husband and father survived. Two weeks later, in Newark, New Jersey, a group of young thugs, led by a released felon with another case pending against him, took the lives of three college-bound youths in what has been described as an execution-style murder.<sup>2</sup> A fourth youth survived despite suffering a gunshot wound to her head.

These crimes, though more brutal than the norm, nonetheless dramatize an enormous problem facing state and local officials throughout the country: what to do about the fact that almost two million offenders will be released from prison in the next three years. Nearly two-thirds of those released will be rearrested within three years, many of them the beneficiaries of early release policies, and many of the arrests will occur within just six months of their release.

The two Connecticut marauders, repeat offenders, were on parole when they attacked, and had been through a drug-treatment center as well as a halfway house to which they had been assigned, after screening, by the Connecticut Department of Correction. In the case of these two, it is difficult to argue that anything but their continued incarceration could have saved the lives of the Hawke-Petit family. But it is equally difficult to judge alternatives to punishment as failures when ex-offenders are lacking employment, training,

mentors, and networks of supporters who can facilitate their reentry into civil society.

Substantial research on offender characteristics might help predict the level of threat an individual poses or his chances of recidivating, including single marital status, unemployment, and a history of drug abuse. Yet judges and parole boards mostly avoid weighing these characteristics when they are sentencing a particular defendant. One of the authors, a former prosecutor, recalls the complaints he heard from legal and ethics scholars when he used empirical research to help him decide which persons to charge as career criminals.

At the same time, the impact of individual characteristics can be strongly affected by external factors. As Jeremy Travis, president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice (part of CUNY) and the author of a pioneering study of prisoner reentry, has written: “Risk is not a static attribute of a particular offender; rather, an offender’s environment, including prospective guardians and opportunities for re-offending, influences his propensity to make unwise choices.”<sup>3</sup> According to Travis, environmental or community factors that affect reintegration include:

- shortage of public housing
- child-support payments
- gang activity (in and out of prison)
- social characteristics of neighborhoods
- restrictions on where ex-offenders can work and limited job prospects
- no savings and no immediate entitlement to unemployment benefits<sup>4</sup>

In short, predicting future behavior, difficult in its own right, should not be attempted in a vacuum. Evidence shows that involving neighbors, peers, and employers in the reintegration of ex-offenders, assisted by organizations that are both faith-based and secular, for-profit and not-for-profit, can make a large difference. Our site visits and reviews of the literature certainly support this conclusion. We came across many programs and individuals that helped ex-offenders become productive citizens.

Unfortunately, most state penal and judicial officials are not working with or sponsoring effective reentry programs. Instead, they approach this looming public safety disaster without a clear mission, quantitative

measures of success, or evidence-based decision making. In addition, officials generally do not direct public expenditures to where they might make the greatest difference. For example, offenders likely to succeed on release do not need intensive programs, yet they are enrolled in them; and offenders judged likely to commit a serious crime upon release—no matter the intervention—should not be released, yet they are.

These things happen in part because there is no criminal-justice system as such, but only assortments of officials in every state who make decisions like the above on the basis of their own tolerance for risk rather than a general understanding of the requirements for community safety. Yet the reality is that each decision—the arrest, charge, length of sentence, prison policies, and release decision—affects all the others.

## The Problem: No Room at the Inn

To crack down on violence and drug-related crimes, the United States undertook through the 1980s and 1990s an aggressive program to arrest and incarcerate lawbreakers. The effort succeeded in reducing crime and making cities safer. For example, using aggressive arrest tactics and performance-based management, Mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg managed to reduce serious crime in New York City by 74 percent between 1993 and 2007.<sup>5</sup>

Stepped-up policing combined with sentencing reform leads to longer and often determinate sentences. When one of the authors served as a district attorney, he supported efforts to make sentences determinate so that victims, the authorities, and the public could know how much time an offender would serve. Yet these determinate schemes also reduced the amount and duration of supervision and control that authorities could exercise upon release.

As a result of more effective policing and laws mandating tougher sentencing measures, the U.S. prison population grew from under 750,000 in 1985 to more than 2.2 million today. Because of high rates of conviction and determinate sentencing, sometime ago, prison populations swelled. According to the Pew Center for the States, more than one in 100 American adults is behind bars.<sup>6</sup> Now these numbers are catching up with us: almost

one-third of all the people behind bars were released in 2007. The vast majority of offenders eventually reenter society; two-thirds of them will offend again. They return to their old communities, become reacquainted with their old friends, and become involved in the illicit activities that got them into trouble in the first place.

And so it should come as no surprise that crime, after a decade of decline, is on the rise again. According to the FBI, figures assembled by the Police Executive Research Forum showed that violent crime increased by 1.9 percent in 2006.<sup>7</sup> A number of factors contribute to the problem. Many prisons have cut back education, job-training, and rehabilitation programs. And in many parts of the country, ex-offenders are sent out the prison door with little more than a bus ticket home.

Felons do not engender public sympathy or demands that limited resources be directed their way. Yet the enormous community harm caused by their appallingly high recidivism rates indicates that it is in everyone's best interest to bring those rates down. Liberals may view reentry assistance to the downtrodden and disenfranchised as the obligation of a just society, while conservatives may view some form of intervention as simply an act of self-defense. Whatever the motivation for doing so, offenders' reentry into society must be eased.

## What Works? Effective Interventions

With the stakes so high and resources so limited, public officials in effect place a large bet when they choose one intervention or another. Empirical research does not provide a list of "silver bullets" that would guarantee either a decrease in recidivism or at least an increase in the amount of time before an offender re-offends. Research does, however, provide clues to what works and what does not. For example, longer sentences do not appear to reduce recidivism. Those serving over five years in federal prison are much more likely to return to federal prison than those incarcerated for a shorter time.<sup>8</sup>

Changing sentencing policies to provide for longer post-release supervision, if that supervision is not regular and observant, does not, however, provide a solution.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the number of parolees/probationers per parole/probation officer continues

to rise significantly. In the face of rising numbers of parolees and probationers, resources for post-release supervision as well as for programs aimed at successful reintegration have stagnated or even dropped.

The picture is not entirely bleak. Offenders involved with drugs who are treated both in prison and after release are less likely to be arrested than those who received no treatment. Their recidivism rates have also been found to be lower than those treated only in prison.<sup>10</sup> Programs that provide only prerelease or only post-release treatment do not necessarily reduce recidivism. South Carolina's Correctional Recovery Academy treatment program in correction facilities for young adult offenders failed to reduce recidivism or relapse.<sup>11</sup> And graduates of the much-studied therapeutic community treatment programs for parolees and probationers are only slightly less likely to be arrested within two years of leaving the program than the general population of offenders.<sup>12</sup>

Another well-intentioned—if superficial—intervention, the Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership, also produced no discernibly positive results. Inmates attended one neighborhood-based group meeting convened by criminal-justice officials at which they received assistance obtaining housing and overcoming negative peer influence. Approximately 40 percent of both the treatment and the control group were rearrested within 24 months, and the treatment group did not take significantly longer to re-offend.<sup>13</sup> With only one post-release meeting, the program probably lacked the necessary intensiveness.

With these mixed results in mind, we set out to identify the components of successful reentry programs. All effective programs depend on leadership and commitment, but we were able to identify the following additional practices worthy of serious consideration: enhanced supervision; adding employment to support and supervision; interventions that start before release; and connections to significant community support and resources, such as what might be provided by faith-based organizations.

## Enhanced Supervision

Generally, parole officers are less concerned with helping released offenders adjust to civilian life

than with making sure that they check in with the required regularity. Indeed, officers' huge caseloads preclude any other possibility. In the view of policymakers and other high-level officials, it is cheaper to pretend that routine monitoring can be meaningful than to offer offenders real support. Even so, there is evidence that close and careful supervision constitutes its own kind of support.

**Proactive Community Supervision.** The Maryland Division of Parole and Probation developed a program called Proactive Community Supervision (PCS), which promised intensive parole supervision and other forms of support.<sup>14</sup> In the PCS model, local probation and parole officers perform an assessment; develop an individualized supervision plan; hold participants accountable for progress toward their behavioral goals, using both incentives and sanctions in the process; and maintain an environment in which supervisees can learn from missteps and minor relapses.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the parole division lowered caseloads of high-risk/high-need parolees and probationers from 100 to 55 per officer in four localities. PCS also enlists community networks of family and friends, mentors, and civic associations, as well as nonprofit agencies to assist with preemployment training. It also contacts employers willing to hire ex-offenders.<sup>16</sup> PCS encourages officers to meet with their low-risk supervisees at the offices of local community or faith-based organizations, a setting where they are more likely to relate their difficulties. PCS recommends meetings with high-risk supervisees at the local police station, where they are reminded of the working relationship between parole/probation officers and law enforcement.<sup>17</sup>

The PCS methodology also seeks to identify the type of problem that looms largest for each ex-offender (drug addiction, street violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, mental illness, general dysfunctionality) and then develop a suitable supervision plan. An important aspect of the program is that the PCS agent and the participant enter into a contract setting out what is expected of both parties. Results are encouraging. A study released in February 2006 by a team of researchers from Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Maryland showed that 32.1 percent of PCS participants were rearrested, in contrast to 40.9 percent of nonparticipants receiving traditional supervision, in effectively the same time span.<sup>18</sup>

**Hampden County Public Health Model for Corrections.** With a rate of HIV infection about ten times higher than the general population's, an incidence of mental illness five times higher, and pervasive untreated chronic illness, prisoners are one of the least healthy and most vulnerable groups in society.<sup>19</sup> The Hampden County Correctional Center, in central Massachusetts, developed its Public Health Model for Corrections precisely to address the problem of limited access to health care. The program has been copied in Washington, D.C., and in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, and it is being considered by Rhode Island, Vermont, and the city of Jacksonville, Florida.<sup>20</sup> The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently invested over \$7 million in propagating the idea.

The original program assigns an inmate to a doctor who provides comprehensive medical care in prison and then remains the inmate's provider after release. One former inmate with a continuing medical condition first diagnosed in prison said, "Easy access to health care helped ease [my] transition from prison.... It is the best care I've gotten in my life. My doctor in there is my doctor out here.... He knows me and my family really well. I trust him."<sup>21</sup> This prisoner now works as a case manager in a local drug-treatment center. According to the center, prisoners report feeling more motivated to take control over their lives and their health.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the recidivism rate at Hampden County Correctional Center in 2000 was only 9 percent, while rates at other correction facilities in Massachusetts were 25 percent or higher.<sup>23</sup>

The wisdom of ensuring ex-prisoners' continued access to health care finds confirmation in a study of detainees with severe mental illness. Of those who received Medicaid-funded services upon release, approximately 16 percent fewer were returned to jail on average over the following 12 months than mentally ill jail detainees not given help. Medicaid benefits alone, however, were not sufficient to keep individuals with severe mental illness out of jail.<sup>24</sup>

## Adding Employment to Support and Supervision

The programs that the authors visited, including Maryland's PCS, described above, demonstrate that

support systems make a huge difference in getting ex-offenders to straighten out. Probably no support system makes as much difference as a job.

One year after release, the unemployment rate for felons returning to society may be as high 60 percent.<sup>25</sup> In New York, the unemployment rate for parole violators is 89 percent.<sup>26</sup> These figures indicate not only that ex-offenders are likely to be unemployed but that the unemployed are likely to recidivate. Conversely, it appears that employment reduces recidivism. In California, an independent evaluation of the Prisoner Reentry Employment Program of Second Chance, a not-for-profit organization in San Diego, found that only 30 percent of individuals in the treatment group were reincarcerated, while 68 percent of the control group went back to jail or prison.<sup>27</sup> The authors studied three programs—the Center for Employment Opportunities in New York, Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco, and America Works of Detroit—and found further evidence that job placement or employment is a successful reentry strategy.

***Center for Employment Opportunities.*** Established as an independent not-for-profit corporation in 1996, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) focuses on comprehensive employment training and services for people returning to New York from incarceration. The CEO model is committed to rapid job attachment. Today CEO offers preemployment training, short-term work-crew experience, and long-term job-development services, including support for the ex-offender through the first year of permanent employment.

CEO has made more than 10,000 job placements. In an average year, CEO places 66 percent of participants who meet with a job developer in full-time jobs. According to preliminary findings from an MDRC random assignment study of recently released prisoners on parole, 9 percent of CEO participants returned to prison for any reason at the one-year follow-up, while the figure was 19 percent for the control group.<sup>28</sup>

The CEO method begins with preemployment workshops, after which a participant is connected to a job coach. CEO's Neighborhood Work Project (NWP) then places participants in a paid transitional job. NWP workers are assigned to work crews performing basic property maintenance, repair, and construction

demolition as well as event preparation for government agencies. Participants receive the New York State minimum wage (\$7.15 in 2007) and are paid daily, up to four days per week. The availability of day and night schedules and a reduced-day week give participants the flexibility they need to meet their other obligations during the transition phase.

The job coach helps build work skills and provides support and encouragement during the job search, while also connecting the participants to support services such as housing and outpatient drug treatment. Two weeks after starting in a transitional job, the participant meets with an employment specialist, who continues to work with the participant until he obtains a suitable, unsubsidized job. CEO's involvement does not end at this point. It goes on to provide workplace counseling and career counseling with the purpose of helping participants hold on to the job they have or get a new one, if need be.

All participants must carry a "Passport to Success"—a daily performance evaluation completed by their supervisor. They are assessed on the basis of their cooperation with the supervisor, effort at work, punctuality, cooperation with coworkers, and personal presentation.

By impressing on participants the importance of a strong work ethic and such related values as effective communication, respectfulness, and the need to master the skills required for the task before them, CEO enables employers to look past participants' criminal records. A transitional work experience that is strictly monitored and frequently evaluated in this fashion enables participants to develop the marketable skills and work habits necessary to obtain and retain unsubsidized work with a potential for growth.

CEO also offers support programs to help participants meet the economic demands posed by an entry-level job. Its Responsible Fatherhood Program helps participants get their child-support payment orders reduced to a level that their modest paychecks can support. CEO also provides workshops on parenting skills, and it hosts events designed to foster the bond between father and child. Fathers who feel such a connection are more likely to seek and keep a legitimate job. In CEO's Rapid Rewards Program, movie tickets,

fare cards, and grocery vouchers mark milestones of continuous employment.

CEO's primary funding for transitional work operations comes from the New York State Division of Parole.<sup>29</sup> CEO earns the funds to pay its transitional workers and cover its operating costs by providing maintenance services to state and city agencies under a contract with the State Division of Parole. Agencies receiving the services pay the Division of Parole through their existing maintenance and repair budgets.

**Delancey Street Foundation.** The campus headquarters of San Francisco's Delancey Street Foundation serves as a home and training center for 500 formerly incarcerated individuals. The program began in 1971 and is still led by its inspirational founder, Dr. Mimi Silbert. Founded on the credo "Each one, teach one," all work is done by its resident participants, with the more experienced teaching the less experienced. Except for a small personal allowance, no salaries are paid to residents, but all basic needs are provided, including dormitory housing, meals, clothing, transportation, medical care, and entertainment.

The organization reports having "more than 12,000 successful graduates"<sup>30</sup> and estimates that more than 75 percent of its residents go on to live successful lives.<sup>31</sup> It does, however, report a high dropout rate in the first three months. The late Dr. Karl Menninger, after reviewing the existing data and conducting his own ten-year study, stated that "Delancey Street is the best and most successful rehabilitation program I have studied in the world."<sup>32</sup> The Delancey Street story has been covered by a wide range of news programs and publications, from *60 Minutes* to the *New York Times*,<sup>33</sup> but because the organization does not accept government funds, it has not been subject to rigorous independent evaluation and monitoring.

**America Works of Detroit.** Incorporated in 2004, America Works of Detroit was a local affiliate of America Works, a full-service employment agency that serves hard-to-employ job seekers nationwide from offices in New York, Oakland, Baltimore, and Albany. The Detroit program was established as one of 11 sites in the three-year Ready4Work national demonstration project, created by the Philadelphia-based research organization Public/Private Ventures, the U.S. Department of Labor,

and the U.S. Department of Justice, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The Ready4Work program ended in 2006.

One recent evaluation found that 76 percent of America Works's 313 Detroit participants were placed in jobs, primarily in food service and construction. Of those placed, 57 percent had worked for at least 90 consecutive days.<sup>34</sup> After six months in the program, 2.5 percent of Ready4Work program participants, including America Works of Detroit, were returned to prison for a new offense, as against a national average of 5.7 percent for nonparticipants.<sup>35</sup> America Works of Detroit worked with more than 140 employers, including Ford Motor Company and McDonald's.

During the 1990s, America Works assisted one of the authors in his Job or Jail program in Indianapolis. Under the program, judges could refer willing fathers who failed to make their required child-support payments to employment agencies such as America Works instead of sentencing them to jail.<sup>36</sup> The Job or Jail experience convinced founder Peter Cove and CEO Lee Bowes that they could use their rapid job-attachment model to help employ ex-offenders.

Participants can more easily face other issues once they experience the pride, independence, self-respect, and sense of responsibility that come with a paying job. America Works has developed an effective methodology for moving unskilled and minimally experienced job seekers into existing, unsubsidized jobs. It focuses on short-term work-readiness training and basic skill-building, followed by rapid job attachment and continuation of support services to promote job retention. Referrals are made to all the needed wraparound services—housing, transportation, day care, and substance-abuse treatment—and assessment is ongoing.



## Starting Programs Before Release

A February 2006 study by Public/Private Ventures shows that the 11 major Ready4Work programs across the United States, including America Works of

Detroit, were extremely effective. Recidivism rates for Ready4Work participants were less than half the national average. The study provides evidence that employment reduces recidivism, particularly if job attachment can be achieved soon after an ex-offender's release from incarceration.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, inmates who participate in education programs while incarcerated have showed lower rates of recidivism.<sup>38</sup> Programs that provide ex-offenders services in prison and then continue after release, such as the two mentioned below, have the most positive impact on prisoners' chances for success after release.

***Resolve to Stop the Violence Program.*** This program, known as RSVP, is administered by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department within state prisons on behalf of violent offenders. It focuses on the roots of violent behavior and its impact. The program won a 2004 Harvard Innovations in American Government Award. Aspects of the program include victim restitution, offender accountability, and reintegration of ex-offenders into their former communities. Its approach is rehabilitative rather than punitive, and one of its overriding goals is preventing further violence. Studies have shown that the longer an inmate is involved in RSVP, the less likely he is to use violence in the future.<sup>39</sup>

***Project RIO.*** Project RIO (Reintegration of Offenders) is an employment program for ex-offenders operated by the state of Texas. Participants receive occupational and educational counseling as well as assistance in filling out a practice job application. They also receive help in obtaining documentation, including a driver's license, Social Security card, and birth certificate, required by employers. In 1990, five years after Project RIO started as a pilot program in Dallas and Tarrant Counties, RIO was saving the state approximately \$15 million each year, researchers from Texas A&M University estimate, "by helping to reduce the number of parolees who would otherwise have been rearrested and sent back to prison."<sup>40</sup> Based on these positive early results, the program was expanded throughout Texas.<sup>41</sup> Today the program operates out of more than 80 facilities and has more than 65,000 participants.<sup>42</sup>

A 2000 study conducted for the Criminal Justice Policy Council of Texas found that the two-year recidivism rate of Project RIO participants was 15 percent for those who found employment and 18 percent for participants

who did not find employment.<sup>43</sup> Project RIO staff believe that a critical factor in the reduced recidivism rates is RIO's emphasis on rapid job attachment and job retention thereafter. However, a Texas A&M study found that "high risk" participants had a rearrest rate of 48 percent, which is still somewhat less than the rate of 57 percent for similar nonparticipants. Overall, the program reduced recidivism rates by 15 percent, according to the study.<sup>44</sup>

One key to the success of Project RIO is its engagement with inmates as soon as they enter prison. RIO staff conduct information sessions with inmates, recruiting the eligible, and bring prospective employers into prison to relate past RIO success stories.<sup>45</sup> Alabama and Georgia have both attempted to replicate Project RIO. Alabama credits its program with reducing the pressure on its jails and annual savings of over \$1 million.<sup>46</sup> According to Ronnie Lane, director of Parolee Training and Employment for the state of Georgia, "What attracted us to Project RIO was precisely its ability to get agencies with different missions to work together on a mutual concern—getting inmates ready for life after prison."<sup>47</sup>

## Faith and Community Support

As a condition of parole, many ex-offenders are forbidden to associate with other ex-offenders, yet their tendency to return to neighborhoods with high concentrations of them makes compliance difficult. Furthermore, these communities often lack the resources, economic and otherwise, to reintegrate those who are returning.

Injecting ex-offenders with religion and other forms of support helps inoculate them against the adverse circumstances of their lives after prison. In fact, inmates who report high levels of participation in religious programs and a strong belief in a supreme being are less likely to be rearrested.<sup>48</sup> Two programs that the authors studied combine mentoring, often under religious auspices, with other services to provide offenders with the inspiration and confidence they need to succeed.

***Operation New Hope.*** Director Kevin Gay opened Operation New Hope (ONH) in 1999 as a community development corporation employing ex-offenders

to rehabilitate houses in a historic but deteriorated neighborhood of Jacksonville, Florida. Urban and human redevelopment were Gay's goals from the outset.<sup>49</sup> By 2003, the organization had restored and sold 29 houses and created about 40 jobs.<sup>50</sup>

Over time, Gay shifted the program's focus from housing rehabilitation to the training, employment, and reintegration of newly released ex-offenders. But he soon recognized that many of them needed more than job training and a paycheck. They abused drugs, had psychological problems, lacked permanent housing, or had gaps in their education that made it harder for them to do their jobs. Virtually all new workers lacked positive role models and a modicum of encouragement. Fortunately, Gay crossed paths with several local ministers who were eager to help.

The Reverend Garland Scott and members of City Center Ministries began serving as mentors to ONH workers. "He restores the houses. I restore the lives," Reverend Scott said at the time.<sup>51</sup> The Reverend David Williams, head chaplain at the Duval County jail, reported referring many inmates to ONH, none of whom returned to prison.<sup>52</sup>

ONH has certain criteria for eligibility: clients must be between 18 and 34 years of age and must be nonviolent; their offenses must not be of a sexual nature; and they must have been released from prison within the previous 90 days. The initial success of ONH at vocational training, as well as its extensive faith-based mentoring and support network, caught the attention of Brent Orrell, director of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives from 2001 to 2005. On the basis of Orrell's assessment, President Bush chose ONH as the model for what was to become the Ready4Work demonstration mentioned above.<sup>53</sup> During its tenure, Gay reports, ONH served more than 500 ex-offenders, only 5 percent of whom committed a new crime.<sup>54</sup>

In a January 2007 report, Public/Private Ventures found that of the 551 participants enrolled at ONH during its own three-year Ready4Work demonstration program—one of 11 around the country—292 were placed in 423 jobs (59 percent). An impressive 71 percent of those placed in jobs were employed for at least 90 days. However, ONH, like America Works, has the disadvantage of having government contracts of

only a single year's duration as its primary source of revenue. Despite its continued success and widespread community support, ONH has been unable to secure a stable and continuing source of funds.

**America Works of Detroit.** The Detroit site of America Works had an optional mentoring program developed in partnership with the Reverend Dr. Charles G. Adams and his Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, also based in that city. More than 100 members of the church served as mentors for America Works participants and helped them solve the many daily challenges accompanying reentry, from housing and dress to avoiding the unproductive use of uncommitted time. Some participants who were helped in these ways became active parishioners.

**PARTNER.** Community and family support can be as uplifting as faith. A notable promoter of the two is PARTNER (Parolees and Relatives toward Newly Enhanced Relationships), a 2003 Harvard Innovations in American Government Award-winning collaboration between the New York State Division of Parole and La Bodega de la Familia, a small family-support center with deep roots in the Lower East Side of New York. PARTNER brings together the parolee, family members, the supervising officer, and a La Bodega family case manager in what is called family partnering case management. Studies of the 1,000 families that have participated show that it has had great success in both promoting addiction recovery and lowering recidivism rates.<sup>55</sup>

## Directing Resources to Reducing Risks

The effort to reduce the discretion of judges and prison authorities has resulted in higher rates of imprisonment and arguably less crime. Increasingly, however, prisons are populated by older recipients of long sentences, who require expensive medical care.<sup>56</sup> But recently, state legislatures have been unwilling to continue expanding prison capacity because of the expense, making it all the more important that existing spaces be used as effectively as possible and combined with thoughtfully designed and rigorously evaluated release programs.

The relative effectiveness of particular forms of intervention cannot be judged in isolation. The

receptiveness or resistance of the population on which they are tried, the presence or absence of ameliorating or aggravating factors in the environment, not to mention an individual's unique capacity for rehabilitation, will powerfully affect the outcomes produced by any program, however well-tested. Officials must be able to make informed, if not flawless, decisions about which inmates are most likely to avoid re-offending under some combination of early release or parole and enrollment in some reentry program, since incarcerating offenders indefinitely is neither a practical nor a humane alternative.

Of course, officials cannot be certain that a particular program will work for a particular offender, but they can find out which factors relating to the offender, his crime, and the intervention program in question promote successful reentry in general. Despite this, judges and state correctional officials rarely consider empirical research or program evaluations when they are deciding a convicted felon's sentence or the length and terms of his probation or parole.

Research helps identify offender characteristics that might assist officials in predicting whether a felon will commit another crime and how soon. For example, the younger the prisoner when released, the higher the rate of recidivism; one study found that 82 percent of released prisoners under age 18 were rearrested within three years, while the three-year rearrest rate for those 45 or older was 45 percent.<sup>57</sup> Multiple arrests preceding a prisoner's current incarceration raise the odds that he will continue to commit crimes after release.<sup>58</sup> Older inmates whose rate of lawbreaking had leveled off before their latest imprisonment are also less likely to re-offend, provided they participate in a reentry program of some kind.<sup>59</sup>

For ex-offenders of whatever description, however, a return to prison is the most likely eventuality. They cannot find a job; they do not know how to fit into regular society. But they do know prison rules and the people inside. Everything they need is provided there—food, housing, employment, and a social role. As the Delancey Street Foundation's founder says, "What is hard on criminals is to insist that they be accountable, that they work hard, that they give back."<sup>60</sup>

## Recommendations

When a released offender commits a crime, the public does not know whom to hold responsible—the judge for a weak sentence, the warden for ineffective rehabilitation, the parole officer for lack of supervision, or the legislature for poor sentencing laws or funding decisions.

Whatever the case, we should begin by thinking about criminal-justice reform the way we thought about welfare reform in the 1990s. In the case of welfare recipients, work provides not only income but direction and self-respect. In countless instances, mothers are struggling largely because the father of their children is behind bars. Upon their release, these ex-offenders need access to the same opportunities—vocational, educational, and otherwise—that have proved to be so helpful to their spouses. If they gain such access, we can expect many of the same improvements in their lives, and elimination of the source of so much crime, including incidents like the slaughter of the Connecticut family and the murder of the three Newark youths.

Our research has discovered a number of policies that qualify as effective interventions:

***Coordinated and shared risk-taking:*** Each of the various branches of criminal justice conceives and carries out its own discrete policies, without regard for their impact on the ex-offenders' long-term prospects or on society as a whole. For instance, wardens understandably devote a high proportion of their budgets to prison safety. But while the inmates, the guards, and the warden's reputation may be protected, that protection will not extend to the public, which will soon be encountering newly released inmates unprepared to rejoin society. Coordinated decision making and resource reallocation are needed to make these various branches, from policy development to risk management, from legislation to parole supervision, function as a true system that can benefit every person and institution that comes into contact with it and its products. Toward that end, the National Governors Association created a Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy in 2004 and has since helped organize state interagency workshops in 12 states. Governors in states including Florida and Oregon have formally established their own reentry task forces.

Reducing crime caused by failed prisoner reentry requires one key piece of the mosaic—state criminal justice and elected officials—to set policy through a transparent and high-level coordinating council. Such a body would regularly deliver research and reports to the legislature and governor. The council’s mission and its definition of success should be clearly defined as enhancing community safety.

**An emphasis on employment:** America Works, the Center for Employment Opportunities, Operation New Hope, and the Delancey Street Foundation all focus their programs on work. Project RIO focuses on education and work. Dozens of other programs around the country do so as well. To promote employment, programs must assist ex-offenders in expeditiously reacquiring proper legal identification, including a driver’s license; adjust child-support payments and arrears; and prohibit discrimination against those with criminal records on grounds that do not bear on their ability to discharge their responsibilities.<sup>61</sup>

**Policies that don’t endanger the community:** Some people make a purely economic argument in favor of reallocating prison spending to programs like Ready4Work, which, they point out, cost about \$4,500 per participant per year, as against the more than \$20,000 to house and secure an inmate.<sup>62</sup> However, offenders do not commit crimes against the general public while incarcerated. The real question for state officials is whether shaving the sentences of some offenders and converting the savings into supportive work programs would net fewer crimes.

**A role for family, faith, and community:** Parole supervision programs should not only focus on exposing ex-offenders to support services, such as mental health and drug treatment; they should draw upon existing or easily revived family and community

ties. The norm, unfortunately, is to seize on technical violations of the terms of parole. Faith-based programs that start in prison and continue after sentences have been served can produce meaningful outcomes when they offer the mentoring, guidance, and hope needed to face a future often marked by social exclusion and fear of the unknown.

**Early intervention:** Working with prisoners before they are released can increase the chances of successful reentry. Teaching marketable skills, particularly through demonstration and practice, prepares inmates to join the workforce and society upon release. Starting early—as soon as an offender enters the system—will, however, require the entire criminal-justice system’s cooperation.

**Sufficient and reliable funding:** Resources remain a challenge for even the best reentry organizations. Outstanding programs such as America Works of Detroit and Operation New Hope had no ongoing source of funding at the time of our research. As with welfare reform, we suggest that federal and state funding take the form of block grants, with performance incentives for local programs based on their progress toward reducing recidivism. Third-party evaluations that show which programs do not work well should result in an expeditious redirection of funding.



The pending release of millions of felons poses grave risks to our communities. Focusing resources on incarceration alone is insufficient. Prison punishes—and may, in fact, deter—but it most certainly does not rehabilitate. The innovative programs we studied show that some interventions do indeed both help the offender and protect the community.

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