

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE PRISONER REENTRY STRATEGIES

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Executive Summary

Every year, state and federal prisons release approximately 650,000 inmates. Within the first year following their release, more than half of them are unable to find a job and earn enough legal income to survive. These men and women are overwhelmingly released into high-crime neighborhoods, where they often reestablish relationships and networks with problematic individuals. The most recent government national survey estimated that within three years of their release from prison, two-thirds of ex-offenders are arrested for a new crime.¹

This study identifies some promising initiatives, all of them funded—at least, in part—by the federal government under the Second Chance Act (2008), that help integrate former prisoners into society and that possibly contribute to bringing down the rate of recidivism. We examine a variety of reentry programs in New Jersey and New York City to identify their strengths and weaknesses. We review public and nonprofit programs serving both youth and young adults, some who have successfully completed high school equivalency (HSE) and others who have not. In particular, we want to determine which programs may be most effective for the most at-risk parolees; the relative merits of transitional employment, short-term training, or direct employment; and the effectiveness of academic tracks at community colleges.

Key Findings:

- ✓ Transitional employment—usually menial work in public institutions or nonprofit organizations, with no development of occupational skills—does not seem to improve ex-offenders' long-term job prospects but does modestly reduce recidivism. Programs that devote time to occupational training alone show some modest positive effect on employment but not on reducing recidivism.
- ✓ Programs that focus on reintegrating ex-prisoners into their communities, combining occupational training, mentoring, social services, and some education, have shown promising reductions in recidivism among certain kinds of offenders, particularly those with substance-abuse or mental-health problems, over a sustained period of time.
- ✓ Reintegration initiatives that offer high school equivalency education (during or immediately after incarceration) can be effective for increasing employment and reducing recidivism—but for offenders who have had difficulty in academic/classroom settings, programs that offer certification of skills in specific kinds of jobs may be the best choice.
- ✓ Based on a survey of the research literature and our own field investigation, there is no “one size fits all” approach to improving the job prospects and reducing the arrest rates of ex-offenders.



IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE PRISONER REENTRY STRATEGIES

Introduction

Research by the Pew Center on the States has estimated that there would be significant savings for government and taxpayers if efforts to reduce recidivism succeed. For example, if California, New York, and Texas each cut their recidivism rates by 10%, they would save \$233 million, \$42 million, and \$33.6 million, respectively.² Lower recidivism also implies fewer crime victims and fewer destabilized families.

The Second Chance Act, enacted in 2008, provided for grants for state and local government reentry programs, to reduce recidivism, provide reentry services, conduct research, and evaluate the impact of reentry programs. We identify three distinctive reentry approaches that have been implemented and evaluated, with varying results.

One set of funded programs adopts a work-first approach similar to President Clinton's 1996 welfare reform: focus on work readiness rather than enhancing the occupational skills of ex-offenders. This approach often begins with transitional jobs—primarily menial work at public institutions that provide stipends—that are a stepping-stone to private-sector employment. Unlike internships, which provide individuals with the occupational skills necessary for permanent employment, transitional jobs are overwhelmingly menial. A 2010 Joyce Foundation analysis of transitional jobs reentry programs in Chicago, St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Detroit found that ex-offenders reported that the transitional jobs provided them with much-needed income during a chaotic reentry process.³

The nonprofit Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) has been a leader in this approach. The results of its program, according to studies, have been mixed. Compared with a control group, CEO clients were no more likely to be employed two years after the first intervention. However, after two years, its clients had a modestly lower recidivism rate: 49.5%, compared with 55.3% for the control group.⁴

An evaluation of America Works' work-readiness programs in New York City found that while overall, there was no significant improvement in long-term private-sector employment, those who had been convicted of relatively minor non-drug-related offenses seemed to benefit substantially from these programs, as did those in a related Newark, New Jersey, program.⁵

A second set of funded programs spends substantial time on developing job readiness and occupational vocational training. The effectiveness of these Reintegration of Ex-Offenders (RExO) programs has also been uneven. According to one study,⁶ they did have a small but significantly positive impact on employment and earnings over a two-year period, compared with a control group. However, they had no impact on recidivism rates, which were 43% for both groups.

A third approach seeks integration into the community rather than employment as the main goal. The Boston Reentry Initiative was designed to help move violent adult offenders released

from jail back to their neighborhoods. Through several agencies, the initiative uses mentoring, social-services assistance, vocational training, and education to help offenders reintegrate into society. A 2009 study showed that high-risk offenders who participated in this program had a 30% lower arrest rate, compared with a control group.⁷

The different approaches to prisoner reentry programs—employment/work-readiness focus, occupational-skills focus, or integration focus—are worthy of further analysis. So, too, is the question of how the high school diploma programs fit into the overall attempts to reduce recidivism.

A 2014 Rand report noted that 37% of state prisoners had less than a high school education in 2004, compared with 19% of the general U.S. population aged 16 and older; 16.5% of state prisoners had just a high school diploma, compared with 26% of the general population; and 14.4% of state prison inmates had at least some postsecondary education, compared with 51% of the general U.S. adult population. Rand conducted a meta-analysis of studies that have evaluated correctional education programs. It found that, on average, inmates who had participated in correctional education programs were 43% less likely to be rearrested than inmates who had not participated. Rand researchers concluded that correctional education is an effective strategy for reducing recidivism and increasing employment. Thus, we include high school diploma programs in our study.⁸

Field-Level Studies

Our research included interviews of former prisoners and staff from various reentry programs. The goal was to understand the various opportunities and experiences that can lead the former inmates to secure jobs. In New York City, Robert Cherry spoke with administrators involved with reentry programs in the Bronx. While some of these reentry programs have a mix of clients, most focus on those who have earned a high school equivalency (HSE diploma) and those who have not.⁹ To judge the outcomes for those with an HSE, Cherry spoke with directors at the Bronx Community College, Hostos Community College in the Bronx, and the education director at the NYC Department of Probation.

Three employment-oriented Bronx programs focused on ex-offenders without an HSE—the Osborne Association, Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), and Fedcap Rehabilitation Services (Fedcap). Cherry

also explored some work-readiness programs that were supported by the NYC Department of Probation.

The New Jersey prison system does not provide an opportunity for inmates to prepare effectively for the HSE, so those released were all placed in work-readiness programs that provide some short-term job training. With the cooperation of Frank Mazza (director of the Hudson County Department of Corrections Community Reintegration Program) and James McGreevey (executive director of the Jersey City Employment and Training Program), Mary Gatta conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with the leadership and staff of the Jersey City and Hudson County programs, along with interviews with formerly incarcerated clients. In addition, we reviewed data collected by the New Jersey Reentry Corporation.

There were significant differences among the New York City programs that we investigated, particularly in terms of those that provided significant transitional employment and those that provided immediate access to unsubsidized private-sector employment. Further research could thus illuminate the relative value of transitional employment. In addition, there were sharp differences between the New York City and New Jersey programs that we investigated. The New Jersey programs targeted the most at-risk individuals: those who had been jailed several times and who had substance-abuse problems. The New York City programs were not targeted, nor did they provide anywhere near the same level of services.

Unlike New Jersey's system, the New York prison system strongly encourages inmates to study for the HSE, so that many successfully completed the exam in prison or through prep programs soon after their release. The literature suggests that they should have superior outcomes to those without an HSE. Ideally, we could have looked at programs with some training component and compared the outcomes of these two groups. We would expect to see that those with the HSE are enrolled in more demanding training programs and have more successful employment outcomes than those without an HSE. Unfortunately, this comparison is not possible. In New York City, none of those who successfully complete their HSE are directed to job-training programs. Instead, virtually all are provided with supports that enable them to enroll in community colleges with the expectation that, if they successfully complete a two-year associate's degree program, they will transfer to a four-year college. As a result, we were precluded from assessing the impact that the HSE had on short-term (or medium-term) employment or earnings outcomes. We can, however, make some judgment on the New York City strategy to

direct all those who attain an HSE to the community colleges.

Programs That Focus on Employment and Work Readiness

Fedcap

In New York City, we investigated three large employment-oriented/work-readiness reentry programs. Fedcap, which is funded by the Small Business Administration, takes a traditional work-first approach: rather than providing support services and work-readiness training, it quickly places the previously incarcerated into paid employment. Fedcap relies on referrals from community-based organizations. There are no clinicians or social workers; those who want educational services must go elsewhere.

After taking a basic skills test, Fedcap quickly brings clients to a business developer, who lines up job possibilities in the private sector. Clients work one-on-one with the developer, who focuses on what the job is and what they have to do to succeed. Fedcap requires that the jobs filled by its clients must pay at least \$10 per hour and provide employment for at least 30 hours per week. The jobs are overwhelmingly in cleaning, food service, and retail—low-wage and entry-level employment that does not often offer routes to economic security. Counseling services and case managers do support job retention, though more often it is the client, not the company, who follows up with Fedcap's retention department. We were told by Fedcap that clients currently have a six-month job-retention rate of about 50%, a bit higher than in the past.

Osborne Association

The Osborne Association, in New York City, has a staff of 100 with nearly 200 full-time employees involved in prisoner reentry programs. It has strong partnerships with employers and works with tenant associations and law enforcement. Parole and probation officers call to follow up with clients and work with landlords. Osborne not only tries to increase employment but also provides mentoring and fatherhood programs to help former prisoners negotiate many of the personal and social hurdles they face.

For those without an HSE diploma, Osborne provides an eight-week work-readiness program. Cash subsidies to clients are built in to short-term training programs. Stipends are given at benchmark intervals: completing

a week, a program, etc. These incentives build the client's capacity to succeed.

There are more generous stipends for a limited number who complete a four-week internship. Embedded within Osborne's program are a few certification possibilities: a 10-hour OSHA construction safety program, an online food handler's certification, and a two-day residential construction program. Osborne's future plans include moving clients into the hospitality industry. The completion rate for the eight-week work-readiness program is 80%.

Paid employment is the goal, but the desire is for clients to develop a career and earn a livable wage. Within three months of their participation in an Osborne work-readiness program, 40%–50% of former prisoners are placed in paid employment, primarily in maintenance, food-sector, and janitorial services. Osborne tries to keep engaged those who don't quickly gain employment, and some of them eventually land a job through their own or Osborne's networks.

Cherry interviewed one initially unsuccessful Osborne client. By the time Anthony (not his real name) was 13 years old, he was selling drugs. Eventually, he was incarcerated. Upon release in 2015, he entered Osborne but was unwilling to leave the street life. Anthony was arrested again but began to change his life around once he was placed in a program for drug dependency. Throughout, Osborne kept in touch with Anthony, and once he was free from drug dependency, it was able to move his life forward. Through Osborne's efforts, Anthony enrolled in a six-month training program at the Refrigeration Institute. When he graduates, he will receive an H-VAC technician certification, enabling him to earn \$20–\$30 per hour. He anticipates obtaining his HSE so that he can enroll in a three-month certification program to become a refrigeration engineer, earning even more.

Another ex-offender, Assante (not his real name), had also sold drugs. When he came to Osborne in 2015, he wanted to succeed; he gained a paid internship with Pathways to Success, run by the Building Performance Institute. Assante gained basic plumbing and electrical skills, leading to his employment as a maintenance worker.

Center for Employment Opportunities

CEO evaluates ex-offenders for five days, and then, for most of them, it provides 75 days of transitional fully subsidized employment—primarily menial jobs at public institutions that provide stipends—before attempting to place them in unsubsidized private-sector employment.

A 2012 MDRC study found that one year after transitional employment, the employment rate for CEO participants was about 30%, the same as the control group.¹⁰ CEO seems to have improved its retention rates in the last few years. Among those who gained employment, CEO reported that 61% achieved a 180-day job-retention milestone and 51% a one-year milestone. CEO national director Will Heaton indicated that, in addition to the transitional employment, his organization is beginning to institute short-term certification programs similar to those offered by Osborne. One CEO client who has been successfully employed for more than a year told Cherry, “My friends have been going to Borough of Manhattan Community College for two or three years and are getting nowhere.”

New York City Department of Probation

The New York City Department of Probation encourages work-readiness programs for those without an HSE diploma. Deldreana Peterkin, director of the department’s Workforce Development Unit, pointed to programs that her office coordinates with Osborne and Fedcap. She also highlighted programs related to jobs in food services that are coordinated through her office.

Peterkin brought up Drive Change, a private-sector food-truck company that trains ex-offenders (aged 18–25) who first complete Food Protection and Mobile Vending Licenses. A smaller group then receives stipend for working in food trucks and food preparation for eight months. This work experience leads to four-month internships with private-sector companies and then to jobs in the food industry, with high retention rates. By contrast, Peterkin pointed to a larger work-readiness program that provided transitional employment in food pantries throughout the five boroughs that has not been successful. Only a few of these clients are actually hired by the organizations where they worked.

The Workforce Development Unit also shapes the probation department’s educational approach for high school–age parolees. Patrick Van Sluytman, the department’s education director, pointed to Coop Tech (School of Cooperative Technical Education), where students have their academics in the morning and get vocational skills in the afternoon. Most of the youth at Coop Tech sent by the probation office are those who were diverted from prison.

Hostos Community College

Through its adult education division, Hostos has numerous certificate and occupational programs that help the previously incarcerated in partnership with community-based organizations that can provide support

services. One example: a pre-apprentice carpentry program run in conjunction with CEO that works with five groups (of 20 former inmates) annually. Some clients who successfully complete the program have gained acceptance into union-administered apprenticeship programs. For others, CEO gains information from industry to help with job placement.

CEO also funds comprehensive, 80-hour OSHA construction safety training at Hostos, including student stipends. Hostos has other contracts to provide more limited OSHA training at the Rikers Island jail complex and the prison barge at Hunts Point. CUNY also funds a pre-construction skills-training program at Rikers. While the long-term impact of Rikers training programs is limited, prison officials encourage them because they dramatically reduce incidents of violence.

Programs That Focus on Community Reintegration

Hudson County’s Community Reintegration Program

New Jersey has a program that resembles the Boston Reentry Initiative focus on integration. Hudson County’s Community Reintegration Program (CRP) operates as a partnership between the Hudson County Department of Corrections and the county’s Department of Family Services. It targets chronic offenders. Eligibility requirements include individuals with a diagnosed mental-health and/or substance-abuse disorder who have been arrested, incarcerated, and sentenced to the Hudson County Correction Center more than once and live in the county. In addition, the Hudson CRP partners with the Jersey City Employment and Training program to provide skills-based training and employment-placement services. As the program expands beyond Hudson County, the New Jersey Reentry Corporation (NJRC) has been incorporated to replicate the Hudson County model in other New Jersey cities, including Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, and Toms River.

Through these partnerships with community-based providers, Hudson County’s CRP provides outpatient substance-abuse services, cognitive/behavioral day-treatment services, bus passes for treatment and job training, medical services, psychotropic medication, and community-assessment/case-management services. Hudson County Community College offers

vocational training classes. Staff meets with clients weekly with an eye toward preparation for post-release services and transition to the community. The prerelease-services phase typically averages two months.

Ex-offenders can also access one of two therapeutic communities (TC) for men and women prerelease. Integrity House operates the two TCs, each of them capable of serving 40 individuals at one time. The Integrity House drug-treatment program is certified by the New Jersey Division of Addiction Services. Once they are released from jail, clients are provided with transitional sober housing and substance-abuse counseling. In addition, case managers connect them with appropriate services, including Medicaid registration and linkages to health care through federally qualified health-care centers and hospitals; identification services through the Motor Vehicle Commission; and legal services and mentoring. Finally, once stabilized, clients are directed to the American Job Center (formerly One Stop Career Center) to develop and execute an employment plan, including job training and job search.

Central to the success of the CRP is treatment for substance abuse and mental health. As a CRP staff member explained: “Once they have the assessment done, clients are placed on a waiting list to go to the Integrity House here in the jail, which is the substance-abuse-based treatment at the jail. Short-term completion is about six weeks, long-term is 90-plus days.... We let them know what we offer upon release if they join the program, which is housing, intensive outpatient treatment, three hours a day three days a week, vocational training, and/or employment training.”

Upon release from jail, clients are placed into transitional sober housing, where the goal is to help them achieve and maintain sobriety, which staff members have learned is crucial if any progress is to be achieved. Another CRP staff member comments that a few years ago, the focus was on employment first; but over time, it became clear that the people in the program were not going to succeed because “they weren’t really focusing on their sobriety.” That, she said, “must be our main focus.”

One of the former offenders interviewed echoed this theme. “I had to take some type of drug counseling, go through like a lot of stuff,” Marcus (not his real name) told us, “but you know, it was like, it was worth it. You know, knowledge and learning, then everything opened.”

Treatment is clearly the first step, but after clients are stabilized (typically 60–90 days), they are connected

with the services available at career centers, including career assessment, case management, and job training. Due to programming constraints, offenders do not gain an HSE while incarcerated. While they do have the option to reenroll in an HSE program, the vast majority go into job training.

From January 2016 to July 2016, the NJRC placed 383 clients in general labor jobs, 227 in warehousing/manufacturing, 101 in food services, 82 in sales, and 43 in transportation. In addition, through a U.S. Department of Transportation “Ladders of Opportunity” grant, the Jersey City program trained 177 clients for a variety of jobs in NJ Transit, Department of Public Works, and for entry into building-trade unions (as laborers, carpenters, masons, painters, and pipe fitters).

The Hudson County program boasts a 19% six-month recidivism rate and a 58% employment-placement rate. Based on the success of the program, the nonprofit NJRC was developed to replicate the model in other parts of New Jersey (Newark, Paterson, Toms River, Atlantic City, and Trenton).

Programs That Focus on Obtaining a High School Diploma

The New York prison system strongly encourages inmates to pass the HSE test while they are incarcerated or shortly after their release. About 30% of Osborne clients are enrolled in its HSE prep program. Those who pass are channeled into community colleges.

Osborne fosters independence and doesn’t track those students. Among those who are failing, organizations within the CUNY (City University of New York) system—the Prison Reentry Institute and the College and Community Fellowship—provide support services to improve college retention. Only about 15% come back to Osborne to be redirected.

At the Department of Probation, Van Sluytman strongly rejected work-readiness programs for adult parolees. Reflecting the 2012 MDRC study of the CEO programs, he believes that parolees “may get jobs, but how long do they retain employment?” As a result, the department has shifted away from direct employment to an emphasis on strengthening educational improvement for adults. It has set up HSE prep programs in the Bronx at the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON), where the previously incarcerated go for probation.

After the HSE is successfully completed, the focus is exclusively on enrollment in a community college.

The Future Now program at Bronx Community College is open to all borough residents, but almost half its students have been incarcerated, the overwhelming majority at Rikers Island. Many of the former offenders have not passed the HSE test, so they enroll in a prep program that has an 85% passing rate. A social worker, funded by the Robin Hood Foundation, helps prep-program students, many of whom have issues that impede their ability to concentrate on education. Though many of these students have mental-health problems, there are no social services provided beyond the social worker.

It is not unusual for students in the Future Now program to miss classes. Future Now provides substantial one-on-one counseling and runs a weekly club at which students meet to discuss academic, family, or other issues. The relationships are so strong that clients continue to seek out Future Now staff for guidance after they graduate and go on to the senior college system.

Compounding the significant personal issues that weigh on them, many who enter Bronx Community College need remedial education—some need six semesters to complete remediation requirements. The Pinkerton Foundation subsidizes those who have used up their financial aid. LaGuardia and a few other community colleges have reduced the math remediation hurdle for students not going into STEM areas by letting them take hybrid courses, but Bronx Community College faculty are resistant. In addition, many in the Future Now program combine school with work. Three of four Future Now students do not graduate from the college. Still, this 25% graduation rate is higher than the community college's overall 15%–18% graduation rate.

Conclusion

All the large-scale work-readiness programs for ex-offenders that we studied in the Bronx and New Jersey appear to have the same 50%–60% employment rates. If clients had been assigned in a randomized manner, this might suggest that the Fedcap approach—immediate paid employment—might be the best, as it is the least costly. But the three large Bronx programs and the ones in New Jersey have different client characteristics: Fedcap accepts the most work-ready while New Jersey focuses on some of the most problematic; Osborne Association and CEO are somewhere in between.

The clear differences in client characteristics between

programs suggests that the support services provided to the New Jersey ex-offenders have proved effective not only in lowering recidivism rates but have also enabled those programs to have comparable employment rates with the Bronx programs. These outcomes strongly support the use of the Boston Reentry Initiative's multiservice approach for the parolees who are the most difficult to reintegrate.

Central to the success of the Jersey City / Hudson County programs is a seamless transfer of services, grounded in partnerships and collaboration, from prerelease to transitional housing to the community. The programs highlight the importance of partnerships with community organizations and employers to provide occupational training and/or job opportunities—and treatment in a therapeutic community *before* employment services, along with the immediate connection to services and programs (such as health insurance, housing, cash assistance, and counseling). Improving outcomes might rest on the state prison system enabling many more inmates to attain their HSE while incarcerated or soon thereafter, as is the case in New York.

Our study also suggests that transitional employment in the nonprofit sector may not be an effective way to improve long-term employability in and of itself. In particular, the use of food pantries had little positive employment effects while CEO's use of janitorial services in public institutions is not linked to the actual employment gained.

By contrast, the limited training programs used at Hostos and the success of the food-truck initiative seem to demonstrate the value of training programs. Indeed, CEO's decision to shift to short-term certificate training reflects the changing nature of seemingly less-skilled employment: the need to demonstrate occupational- and industry-specific basic skills.

Ex-offenders who do not have an HSE are in work-readiness programs with very limited certificate programs that run for two weeks, to give clients the most basic skills in various vocational areas. When we asked Osborne and CEO officials why they are so limited, they answered that the clients did not have the behavioral traits or academic skills necessary to sustain more extensive training.

Are former prison inmates who do obtain an HSE prepared for community college and the eventual attainment of four-year degrees while holding a job and dealing with a host of personal issues? Clearly, many complete the HSE but still do not have the skills or behavioral traits to overcome their personal or social im-

pediments in order to sustain such a long-term goal.

The experience of former prisoners in the Future Now program suggests that, for many, certificate programs, which prepare people for employment as soon as possible, may be the best choice. Virtually all the former prisoners have had bad experiences in academic settings that make it difficult for them to deal with difficult classroom settings for an extended period of time. Certificate programs can enable them to experience success in a shorter period—success that they can build upon.

An example of a successful certificate program is Hostos’s culinary program, which, beside its own staff, coordinates with Workforce 1 Brooklyn to help students find employment. Unfortunately, the New York City Department of Probation has virtually no involvement with certificate programs. Peter Maertens, director of Hostos’s certificate programs, told us that, except for CEO, no other reentry program has asked for certificate programs for its clients.

The postsecondary certificate, according to a recent comprehensive report published by the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, “has become a cost-effective tool for increasing postsecondary education attainment and gainful employment.”¹¹ The study found that certificates that are granted after a training program that lasts for at least one year led their holders to earn a wage premium identical to college associate’s degrees (which are earned in two to three years)—almost 40% for women and about 20% for men.

The average certificate awarded after a short-term training program of less than one year generally has more limited value—but not always. For example, police and protective-services certificates are predominantly short-term and earned by men, but they exceed the average 27% wage premium for males who hold similarly short-term certificates. Certificates in business and office management are predominantly short-term and earned by women, but they exceed the earnings of the median female certificate holder. Including all certificates, the wage premium was 16% and 27%, respectively, for women and men. Similar results are found in a recent U.S. Census Bureau study.¹²

A recent government report documented the positive role of certificate programs offered in the prison systems of a number of states.¹³ It cited two studies that specifically assessed the impact of certificates obtained while incarcerated. One study found that those who made educational gains while incarcerated had “increased employment rates and reduced recidivism.” Similarly, another study found that “vocational train-

ing increased the likelihood of consistent living-wage employment.”¹⁴ Given the proven success of certificates, more prisoner reentry programs should consider offering this type of training.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo has recently proposed offering free tuition to students attending public two- and four-year colleges. The proposal, as it stands now, ignores vocational training and certificate programs—leaving out of the picture ex-offenders and others who would benefit from getting the credentials that employers increasingly expect.

This paper has examined the literature and conducted field investigations of prisoner reentry programs. It did not undertake a randomized control study, so our findings should be considered tentative. More rigorous inquiries would be necessary to better judge the effectiveness of the Boston integration model to aid the most at-risk parolees, the efficacy of transitional employment in nonprofit and public sites, and the underutilization of certificate programs. Nevertheless, by highlighting several salient issues, it is our hope that these findings will help policymakers move forward to identify the most effective strategies for the reentry population.

Endnotes

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Abstract

State and federal prisons release approximately 650,000 inmates each year. Within the first year following their release, more than half of them are unable to find a job and earn enough legal income to survive. The most recent government national survey estimated that within three years of their release from prison, two-thirds of ex-offenders are arrested for a new crime.

This study identifies some promising initiatives that help integrate former prisoners into society and that possibly contribute to bringing down the rate of recidivism. We examined reentry programs in New Jersey and New York City to identify their strengths and weaknesses. We also examined public and nonprofit programs serving both youth and young adults, some who have completed high school equivalency and others who have not. The goal was to determine which programs may be most effective for the most at-risk parolees; the relative merits of transitional employment, short-term training, or direct employment; and the effectiveness of academic tracks at community colleges.

Key Findings

1. Transitional employment—usually menial work in public institutions or nonprofit organizations, with no development of occupational skills—does not seem to improve ex-offenders' long-term job prospects but does modestly reduce recidivism. Programs that devote time to occupational training alone show some modest positive effect on employment but not on reducing recidivism.
2. Programs that focus on reintegrating ex-prisoners into their communities, combining occupational training, mentoring, social services, and some education, have shown promising reductions in recidivism among certain kinds of offenders, particularly those with substance-abuse or mental-health problems, over a sustained period.
3. Reintegration initiatives that offer high school equivalency education (during or immediately after incarceration) can be effective for increasing employment and reducing recidivism. But programs that offer certification of skills in specific kinds of jobs may be the best choice for offenders who have had difficulty in academic/classroom settings.
4. Based on a survey of the research literature and our field investigation, there is no “one size fits all” approach to improving the job prospects and reducing the arrest rates of ex-offenders.