

Prepared Remarks of

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Before the

**United States House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies**

Regarding

***Assessment of the
Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative***

March 11, 2009



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, we are pleased to appear before you today and to provide you with information regarding the evaluation of the *Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative*, a National Institute of Justice funded study that is being conducted by researchers at RTI International and the Urban Institute.

I am Dr. Pamela Lattimore, a Principal Scientist at RTI International. Seated next to me is Dr. Christy Visher, Principal Research Associate at the Urban Institute and Professor at the University of Delaware. We are Co-Principal Investigators of the evaluation.

As you may know, RTI International is an independent, nonprofit research organization based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, that provides research and technical expertise to governments and businesses in more than 40 countries. The Urban Institute, located in Washington, D.C., is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that examines the social, economic, and governance challenges facing the nation.

Dr. Visher and I have been studying criminal behavior and the effectiveness of correctional programs for more than twenty years. These issues have taken on more importance during this time as the number of people under the supervision of the criminal justice system doubled from 3.7 million in 1988 when Dr. Visher and I began visiting research fellowships at the National Institute of Justice to 7.3 million in 2007 (the latest data available). During this time, the number of people in state and federal prisons grew from about 600,000 to nearly 1.6 million. Our local jails now hold over 780,000—more than double the 340,000 who were jailed in 1988.

These increases have been accompanied by a growing price tag. In 2006, federal, state and local governments spent nearly \$69 billion on corrections—more than three times the \$20 billion spent in 1988. If we add in other criminal justice costs such as law enforcement and court systems, we see similar increases with a much larger price tag: total criminal justice costs have grown from \$65 billion in 1988 to nearly \$215 billion in 2006.

These numbers represent a significant investment at the federal, state and local levels and many lives. The question that confronts us is “Is there a better way?”

For the past nearly six years, we have been evaluating the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) that provided grants to 69 state agencies across the country in 2003 and 2004. The Initiative was an ambitious, \$110 million federal investment that provided corrections and juvenile justice agencies with grants to develop and implement prisoner reentry programs.

SVORI grants supported the creation of a continuum of services that started in prison and continued following release. SVORI had four specific objectives:

- 1) Improve the quality of life and self-sufficiency of released prisoners by improving employment, housing, and family and community involvement;
- 2) Improve the health of returning offenders by addressing substance use, and physical and mental health problems;
- 3) Reduce criminality among returning offenders through programming and services, as well as supervision and monitoring; and
- 4) Promote systems change through multi-agency collaboration and case management strategies.

Although the grantees shared these objectives, each grantee crafted a unique approach that reflected local needs and resources. All grantees were required, at a minimum, to establish and support a partnership between institutional agencies, such as the departments of corrections and juvenile justice, and at least one community agency.

Grantees were also encouraged to include five specific components in their programs: diagnostic and risk assessments, individual reentry plans, transition teams, community resources, and graduated levels of supervision. Within this basic framework, each grantee used the SVORI funding to tailor reentry programming to the needs of their jurisdictions.

In addition to imposing relatively few restrictions on grantees, the SVORI grants differed from previous programs for prisoners that, generally, are reserved for non-violent and, often, for first-time offenders. (For example, the Prisoner Reentry Initiative that was funded by the federal government after SVORI explicitly excludes people who have ever been convicted of violent or sex offenses.) The SVORI grantees were allowed to interpret “serious and violent” and most appear to have focused their programs on violent and/or repeat offenders.

The impact of this unprecedented reentry program investment is the focus of the SVORI multi-site evaluation, the most extensive evaluation ever funded by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. After a one-year planning grant, we conducted three surveys of the directors of the 89 SVORI programs that were developed by the 69 agency grantees. These surveys collected information on the nature of each of the locally designed SVORI programs, including the components of the program and the targeted participant population(s), as well as information on the barriers that were encountered and overcome as programs were developed and implemented.

We also conducted interviews with SVORI program participants and comparison subjects from 12 adult programs and 4 juvenile programs located in 14 states. In total, we interviewed nearly 2,500 men, women and boys between July 2004 and April 2007 at four specific points in time: about 30 days prior to their release from prison, and at 3, 9 and 15 months following their release. (We were unable to recruit sufficient numbers of girls to include them in the study.)

The interviews asked for detailed information on criminal and employment history and past substance use; treatment and service needs; services and program receipt; and numerous outcomes in criminal justice, employment, health (including current substance use and mental health), and housing. For those in

the community at 3 and 15 months following release, we also conducted oral swab drug tests.

Finally, during this past year, we received administrative recidivism data from these fourteen states and the FBI that we will use to determine official reincarceration and rearrest rates.

All of this information is being analyzed to examine the impact of these 16 SVORI programs in 14 states (12 adult and 4 juvenile programs). The evaluation is not yet complete, but we are able to share with you some of the important conclusions of our work so far.

(1) The successful reintegration of individuals exiting prison is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach.

The SVORI legislation specified a joint effort of the Departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development. This collaboration acknowledges that individuals leaving prison have needs that span multiple domains and that these needs are interwoven. For example, individuals exiting prison generally have little education and few job skills. They are likely to have problems with drugs and alcohol and many suffer from mental illness. Additionally, things that we take for granted—such as a driver’s license, how to fill out a job application, having a place to live—may be out of reach.

For example, among our respondents, only about 60% of the adults (less than 20% of the boys) had finished twelfth grade or had a GED. Less than two-thirds of the men and only about half of the women had worked during the six months prior to their current incarceration (only slightly more than a third of the boys had worked). Further, 95% of the men and women and nearly 90% of the boys admitted to having used illegal drugs. Nearly 80% of the women, about 55% of the men and 50% of the boys had been treated for either a mental health or substance abuse problem prior to incarceration.

The SVORI program participants also had serious criminal histories. Fully 80% of the adults had been in prison before. Half of the men and 30% of the women also had had at least one juvenile detention. The men reported an average of 13 prior

arrests—the women about 11 and the boys about 7. The boys also had prior records—most had been in juvenile correctional facilities before.

(2) SVORI funding was a significant step forward in the development and continuation of reentry programming in most states.

SVORI funding boosted the development of reentry programming in most states, according to SVORI program directors. We conducted an email survey of SVORI program directors early last year—after the programs had expended all of their SVORI grant funds—to determine whether activities initiated with SVORI grant funds were continuing. We received responses from 56 of the 89 programs. More than three-quarters of the program directors said that their agencies were continuing at least some programs or activities that began as a result of SVORI grant funds. A similar proportion said that their states had developed and were implementing other reentry components. Many suggested that the SVORI funds had been instrumental in starting or improving their states’ efforts to develop reentry programming.

(3) SVORI funds increased collaboration among state and local agencies and organizations.

An important goal of the SVORI grants was to foster increased collaboration between departments of correction or juvenile justice and other state and local agencies as well as community and faith-based organizations. In interviews with directors of the 16 programs in our impact evaluation, nearly all of the directors reported that the relationship between their agency and the community supervision agency had improved as a direct result of the SVORI grant. One program director said, “SVORI played a part in all the change [that was] going on. It was the catalyst by virtue of providing funds and guidance to put a model in place and demonstrate to the system how this could be done.”

Further, 13 of the 16 program directors reported increased collaborations with community-based organizations (or CBOs), and 9 of the 16 reported increased collaborations with faith-based organizations (or FBOs)—again, as a direct result of the SVORI grant. One director said, “SVORI enhanced awareness both on the

part of the Department of Corrections as well as on the part of the CBOs as to how it's important to work together. We have developed a set of FBOs with whom the DOC can work. FBOs are also contacting DOC directly to ask if there are things that they can do.”

Of note, most of the program directors reported that these new and improved collaborations had continued or expanded after the conclusion of the SVORI grant.

(4) SVORI funds resulted in the development of local programs that provided an increase in services for participants.

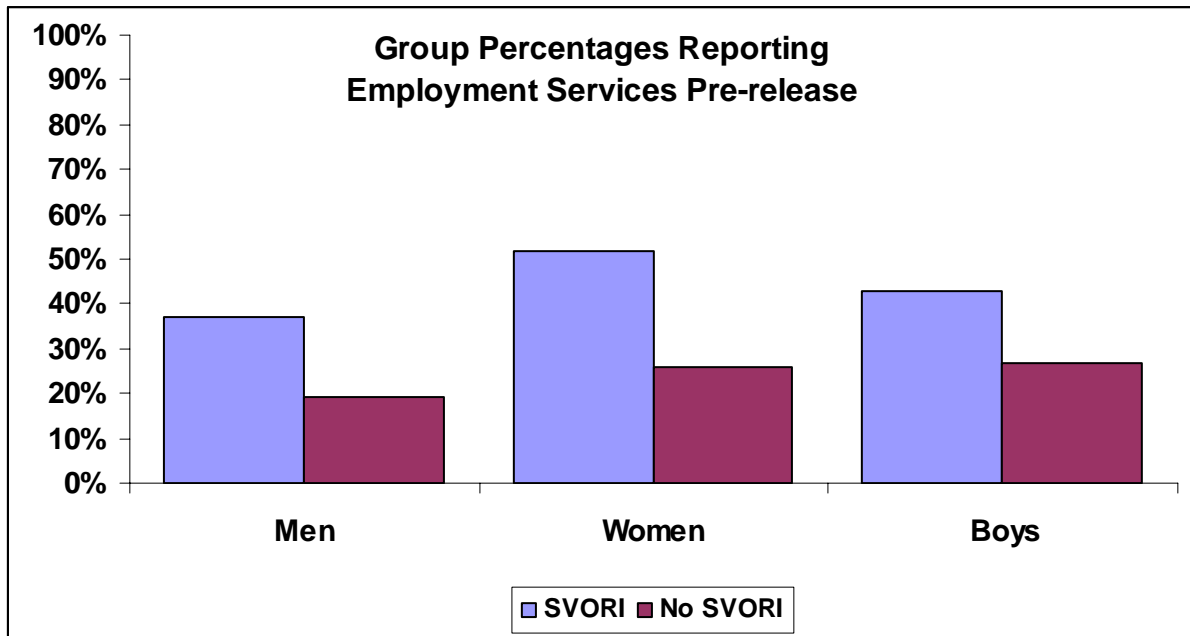
Overall, participation in SVORI programs greatly increased the likelihood of receiving a wide variety of services, such as reentry planning, assistance obtaining documents (such as driver's licenses), mentoring, substance abuse and mental health treatment, and educational and employment services. This was true for the men, the women and the boys.

For example, 98% of women and 87% of the men participating in SVORI programs reported receiving at least one of twelve transition services. The most common was services to prepare for release: 90% of the women and 75% of the men reported that they had received services to prepare for release. These percentages were about 50% higher than those reported by the comparison groups (59% of women and 51% of men).

Most of the adult programs identified employment as a primary focus. Most SVORI participants (93% of the women and 79% of the men) reported that they had received at least one of six educational and employment programs or services. The most common types of services reported were educational services, training to change attitudes towards criminal behavior, and life skills programming.

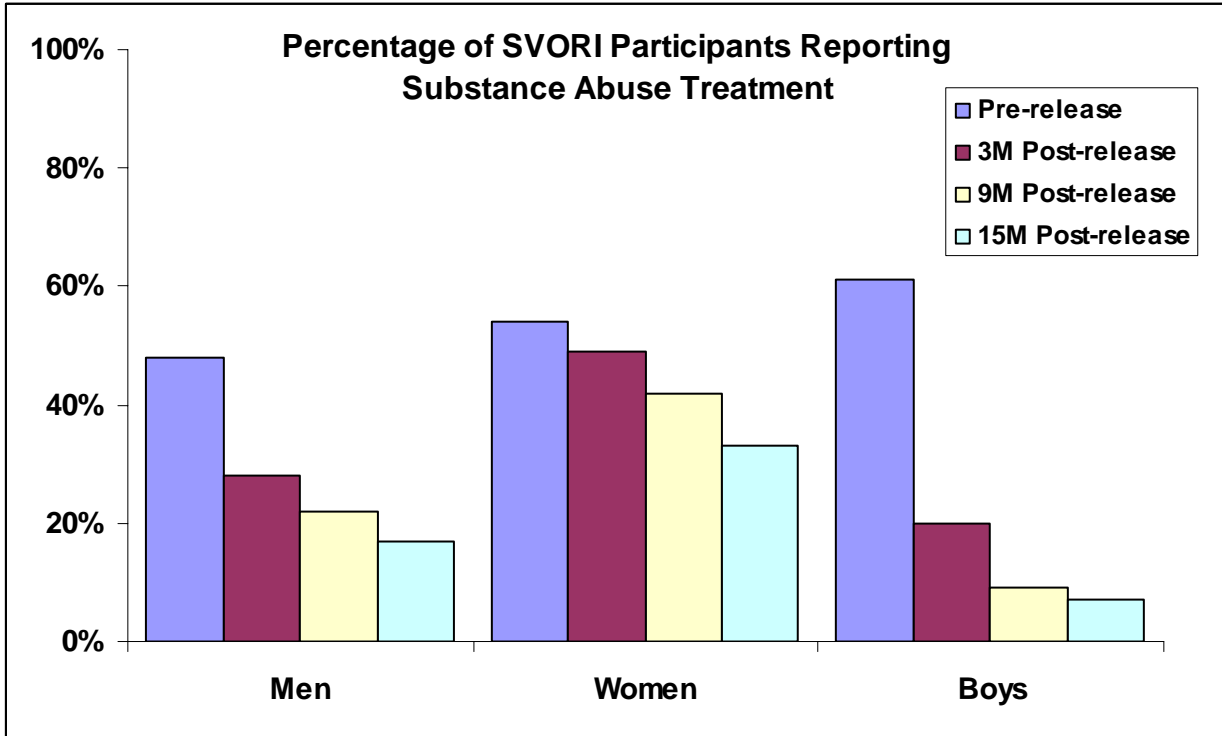
Only 37% of the men and 52% of the women said that they had received employment services. However, these percentages were about twice those of the comparison subjects who said they had received such services. So, again, SVORI

program participation greatly increased the likelihood of services or programs—but at levels far less than 100%.



(5) More services were delivered prior to release than after release.

The level of provided services and programs dropped substantially following release. For example, as the chart on the following page shows, on average, about half of the men in SVORI programs received substance abuse treatment in prison—a percentage that dropped substantially following release. Similar findings were observed for the boys who were in SVORI programs. The women were somewhat more likely than the males to continue receiving services following release.



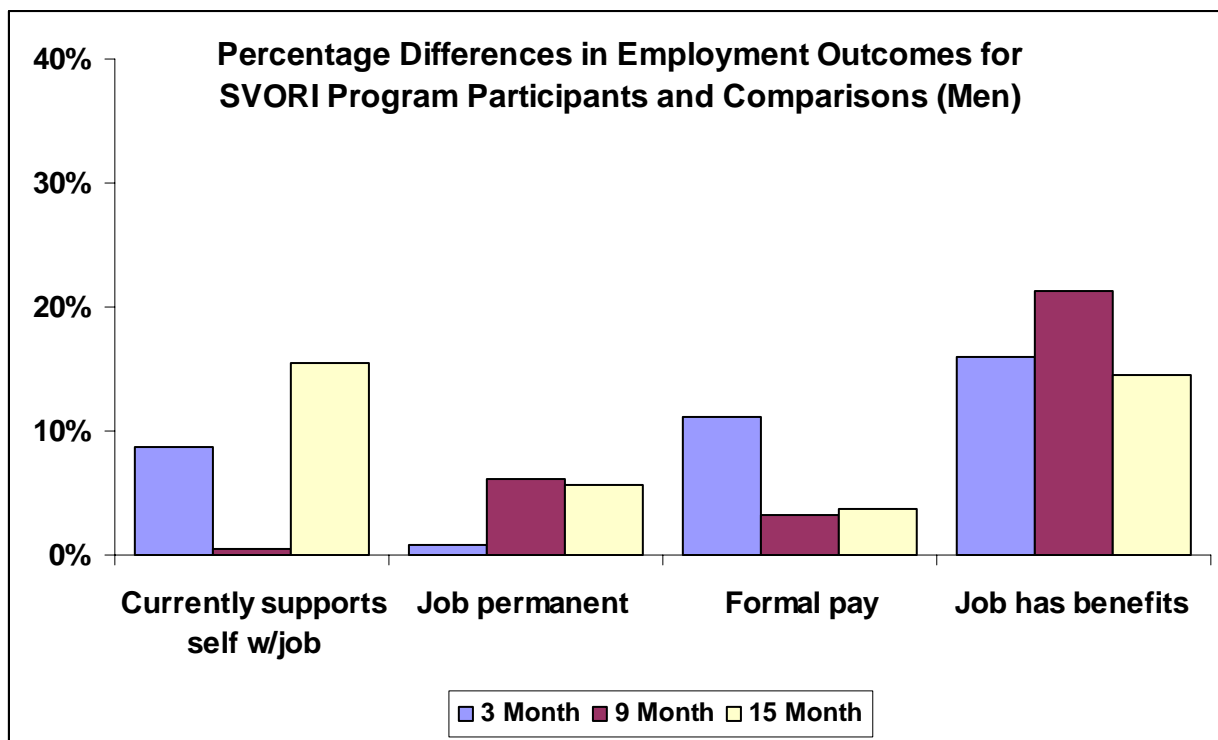
(6) The \$69,000,000 question: What was the impact of SVORI on outcomes?

Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative program participants were much more likely to receive a broad array of services and programming than similar individuals who were not in SVORI programs. However, this was much truer during the pre-release phase than following release. Also, although levels were higher, they were not 100%. These services were expected to lead to improved outcomes across a variety of dimensions, including housing, employment, mental health, family relationships, education, substance use, and criminal behavior.

We are finalizing our impact analyses and can report only preliminary findings. We have examined over 100 possible outcomes across the domain areas targeted by SVORI. In most cases, the difference in outcomes between those participating in SVORI programs and the comparison subjects indicates that SVORI program participation resulted in an improvement in outcomes.

In many cases, these differences were small, but we know from the literature that effective correctional programs generally result in improvements of 5% to 15%, so our findings are in line with what we would have expected.

These positive findings span the various outcome areas and the three post-release interview periods. For example, the preliminary results for the adult men in our study on some of our employment measures show that SVORI program participants were about 10% more likely than comparison subjects to report supporting themselves with a job 3 months following release. They were also more likely to report having a job that was permanent, that offered formal pay, and that had benefits such as health insurance and vacation pay.



In conclusion, the SVORI programs provided significant but small increases in services to a population with tremendous needs in education, employment, health and basic living skills.

Those participating in SVORI programs overall have better outcomes following release from prison than comparable individuals who received some services while in prison but who did not participate in SVORI programs.

These findings are very encouraging because they suggest that small differences can have an impact and that programs have a basis to continue to improve their programs and their outcomes by expanding the services provided to each participant. As we learned, most of the SVORI programs chose to continue to build on what they learned and implemented as a result of their SVORI grants. They continued and expanded the services that were being provided, as well as the collaborations and partnerships.

Finally, we would like to point out that this type of comprehensive, detailed evaluation is highly uncommon for justice research.

We only touched on some of the highlights today of what we have been able to learn by having the luxury to study 16 SVORI programs and thousands of subjects over a number of years. Most justice program evaluations focus on single programs with small numbers of subjects and for short periods of time.

Unfortunately, a shortage of funding for criminal justice research prevents policy makers from having ready access to independent, objective information to assist them in making important decisions in this vital and increasingly expensive policy area.

Though the National Institute of Justice has existed for more than 40 years, since the Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, its budget remains remarkably underfunded. NIJ's base budget in the FY 2009 Omnibus Appropriations bill is \$48 million.

These funds—which again represent the primary source of funding for criminal behavior and justice research—signify an incredibly small commitment to understanding a major policy area that concerns all our nation's citizens and, as we noted at the beginning of our remarks, consumes \$215 billion annually.

Although there are many priorities competing for federal dollars, comprehensive evaluations can lead to improved policy development, improved program implementation and administration, better use of taxpayer dollars, and improved outcomes—returns on investment that will also make us safer.

Thank you for your time. We would be happy to answer questions.