

From Prison to Work: The Employment Dimensions of Prisoner Reentry

A Report of the Reentry Roundtable

Amy L. Solomon
Kelly Dedel Johnson
Jeremy Travis
Elizabeth C. McBride



URBAN INSTITUTE

Justice Policy Center
2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
www.urban.org

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amy L. Solomon is a policy associate at the Urban Institute, where she works to link the research activities of the Justice Policy Center to the policy and practice arenas. Her primary areas of concentration include prisoner reentry and problem-solving approaches to community safety. Ms. Solomon currently manages the Institute's research partnerships with the *Reentry Policy Council* and the National Governors Association's *Prisoner Reentry Academy*. Prior to joining the Urban Institute, Ms. Solomon served as policy analyst and acting director of strategic planning at the National Institute of Justice. She has also managed an alternative sentencing program, developed reentry strategies for returning prisoners, and worked with juveniles in detention, probation, and school settings. Ms. Solomon received a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan and a Master's in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Kelly Dedel Johnson is the director of One in 37 Research, Inc. based in Portland, Oregon. As a consultant to federal, state, and local agencies, her research on the juvenile and criminal justice system takes one of three major forms: 1) developing written tools to enhance practice or inform public policy; 2) conducting investigations on the conditions of confinement in juvenile correctional facilities; and 3) undertaking rigorous evaluations of various juvenile and criminal justice programs to determine their effectiveness. Prior to working as a consultant, Dr. Dedel Johnson was one of the founders of The Institute on Crime, Justice, and Corrections at The George Washington University, and also worked as a senior research associate at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. She has also worked with juveniles on probation and their families and survivors of sexual assault. Dr. Dedel Johnson received a B.A. in psychology and a B.A. in criminal justice, both from the University of Richmond, Virginia, and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the Center for Psychological Studies in Berkeley, California.

Jeremy Travis became the fourth president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice on August 16, 2004. Prior to his appointment, President Travis served four years as a senior fellow affiliated with the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. There, he launched a national research program focused on prisoner reentry into society and initiated research agendas on crime in a community context, sentencing, and international crime. From 1994 to 2000, Mr. Travis directed the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. Prior to his service in Washington, Mr. Travis was deputy commissioner for legal matters for the New York City Police Department from 1990 to 1994. Mr. Travis has taught courses on criminal justice, public policy, history, and law at Yale College, the New York University Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York Law School, and The George Washington University. He has authored one book, co-edited two books, and published numerous book chapters, articles, and monographs on constitutional law, criminal law, and criminal justice policy. He is a board member of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute. Mr. Travis earned a J.D., cum laude, from the New York University School of Law, and an M.P.A. from the New York University Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. He received a B.A., cum laude, in American studies, from Yale College.

Elizabeth C. McBride is a research assistant with the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her primary research interests are prisoner reentry and the impact of crime policies on communities. Her past projects have included a design for a school violence and drug abuse prevention program and an evaluation of tribal courts. Prior to joining the Urban Institute, she worked as a policy analyst at Carnevale Associates, LLC, where she conducted research on crime trends and criminal justice policies and wrote topical publications for U.S. Department of Justice initiatives. Ms. McBride received her B.A. in politics, summa cum laude, and a certificate in American studies from Princeton University.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from prison to the community is not a new phenomenon. The vast majority of prisoners are released to society and face the challenges of adjusting to the freedom, temptations, responsibilities, and struggles of the street. What has changed, however, is the scale of prisoner reentry—more than 630,000 prisoners now return home each year, four times the number that came home 25 years ago (Harrison and Karberg 2004; Hughes and Wilson 2002; Travis and Lawrence 2002). The impact of the increased number of annual releasees is amplified even further because prisoners are spending longer periods of time incarcerated and have diminishing access to education and training programs that could assist in their transition upon release (Lynch and Sabol 2001). Over the past decade, a greater proportion of inmates have been released without post-prison supervision and without services to assist them with finding jobs, housing, and needed support services (Petersilia 2003). Finally, disproportionately large numbers of prisoners are released to a relatively small number of communities that are already challenged by high unemployment and poverty rates, few job opportunities, crime, and gang activity (Lynch and Sabol 2001; La Vigne, Kachnowski, et. al 2003, La Vigne, Mamalian, et. al 2003, La Vigne, Thomson, et. al 2003, Visher, La Vigne, and Travis 2004). Thus, individuals are released from prison with the need to reestablish themselves in the community, but are often released into environments that are ill-prepared to support a positive transition and full of risks and challenges.

The criminal justice literature indicates that people released from prison often continue their involvement with the criminal justice system. The Bureau of Justice Statistics completed two recidivism studies on prisoners released in 1983 and in 1994. Both studies revealed that approximately two-thirds of those released (62.5 percent for the 1983 cohort and 67.5 percent for the 1994 cohort) were subsequently rearrested within three years of release (Beck and Shipley 1989; Langan and Levin 2002). These rearrests generate significant fiscal costs for the criminal justice system, human costs in terms of victimization, and costs with respect to public support—a growing public sentiment that the criminal justice system does not work to control crime. Changes to existing policy and practice showing even modest improvements over the current state of affairs have the potential to transform the way in which the phenomenon of prisoner reentry impacts society. Rather than draining community resources, safety, and morale, prisoners who return to the community with support systems in place can become productive members of society, thus saving resources, strengthening family and community ties, and expanding the labor force and economy.

The challenges and opportunities of prisoner reentry raise important questions about what can be done to better serve prisoners, their families, their communities, and society at large as we face released prisoners' inevitable return home. How can we boost the odds of successful reintegration? How can we reduce the known risks that have historically thwarted that goal? How can policies and practices be improved in the short-term?

In an effort to address these important questions, the Urban Institute has invited academics, practitioners, policymakers, service providers, former prisoners, and community leaders to participate in a series of Reentry Roundtable discussions to assess the state of knowledge surrounding various dimensions of reentry, including substance abuse, race, gender, health, housing, the role of civil institutions, and the impact of reentry on communities and families. The fifth Roundtable, held in May 2003, focused on policies, practices, problems, and incentives involved in connecting returning prisoners to meaningful employment. Five discussion papers and four presentations were commissioned and, combined with the discussions that came out of the Roundtable and additional literature from the field, form the conceptual framework for this report. Much of the content of this monograph is derived directly from these papers.

Reentry Roundtable May 2003

Meeting Participants

Jeremy Travis (Co-chair), The Urban Institute	John Jeffries, National HIRE Network
Tony Thompson (Co-chair), New York University School of Law	Rick Keister, Delco Remy International
Robert Atkinson, Progressive Policy Institute	Ronald Mincy, Columbia University
Roger Baysden, Iowa Prison Industries	Demetra Nightingale, The Urban Institute
Dan Bloom, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation	John Nuttall, New York State Department of Correctional Services
Fred Braun, The Workman Fund	Ronald Owens, City of Oakland
Shawn Bushway, University of Maryland	John Ownby, Texas Workforce Commission
Robert Carmona, STRIVE	Alice Patterson, Clark Construction Company
Rodney Carroll, Welfare to Work Partnership	Anne Piehl, Harvard University
Peter Cove, America Works	Knut Rostad, The Enterprise Prison Institute
Benjamin De Haan, Oregon Department of Corrections	Unmi Song, The Joyce Foundation
David Ellwood, Harvard University	Michael Stoll, University of California, Los Angeles
Jeffrey Fagan, Columbia University	Mindy Tarlow, The Center for Employment Opportunities
Richard Freeman, Harvard University	Susan Tucker, Open Society Institute
Sallie Glickman, Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board	Darren Walker, The Rockefeller Foundation
Harry Holzer, Georgetown University	Bruce Western, Princeton University
	Diane Williams, Safer Foundation

Discussion papers commissioned by the Reentry Roundtable

- "Can We Close the Revolving Door," by Richard B. Freeman, Harvard University
- "Crime, Work, and Reentry," by Anne Piehl, Harvard University.
- "Employment Barriers Facing Ex -Offenders," by Harry Holzer, Georgetown University; Steven Raphael, University of California at Berkeley; and Michael A .Stoll, University of California at Los Angeles
- "Can Inmates Become an Integral Part of the U.S. Workforce," by Knut A. Rostad, The Enterprise Prison Institute, and Rob Atkinson, The Progressive Policy Institute
- "Reentry and Prison Work Programs," by Shawn Bushway, The University of Maryland

Reentry Roundtable papers available at <http://www.urban.org>

Presentations for the Reentry Roundtable

- "Where Is the Economy Headed over Time and How Will the Prison Population Be Affected?" by David Ellwood, Harvard University
 - "Reality Check: Employment Challenges and Successes," by Robert Carmona, STRIVE
 - "From Prison to Work: Applying Lessons from Welfare Reform," by Rodney Carroll, Welfare to Work Partnership
 - "From Prison to Work: Applying Lessons from Welfare Reform," by Peter Cove, America Works
-

The aim of this monograph is to highlight relevant research and identify key policy issues. The report first addresses the relationship between work and reentry, outlining the links between gainful employment and individual, familial, community, and societal outcomes once prisoners are on the outside. Next the monograph describes the current labor market, identifying the gap that former prisoners could potentially fill when they enter or return to the work force. The focus then shifts to explore the skill sets, education levels, work histories, and health-related needs of returning prisoners. With this understanding of the population, the report examines the past and current state of work inside state and federal prisons. In this section, the report identifies the potential benefits of various types of inmate labor as well as prison programming aimed at enhancing employment opportunities upon release. The monograph then looks at the opportunities for as well as the legal barriers to work on the outside. This section draws upon the lessons learned from three effective employment programs, highlighting the importance of links between work on the inside and outside. Finally, the document identifies key considerations to meet the goals of enhancing work opportunities available to prisoners and expanding work opportunities after release.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND REENTRY

The connection between work and crime is multifaceted. Research has shown a relationship between an individual's status in the workforce and his or her likelihood of committing a crime. For example, higher levels of job instability have shown to lead to higher arrest rates (Sampson and Laub 1993). In addition, as wages go up, crime has shown to decrease (Bernstein and Houston 2000; Western and Petit 2000). Research also indicates that there is a correlation between increases in money earned through legitimate means and decreases in illegal earnings (Bernstein and Houston 2000; Uggen and Thompson 2003).

Research has also suggested that work has benefits that reach multiple levels, including the individual, family, community, and societal levels. Individual-level benefits include rehabilitation—work offers former prisoners an opportunity to develop new roles as productive members of society. Holding a job serves as an important signal that the individual is moving toward a crime-free lifestyle. Perhaps most importantly, employment can increase the skill level, breadth of job experience, and earning levels of former prisoners. In addition, it can bring daily structure and prosocial connections to situations that are often fraught with too little of the former and too few of the latter. Research suggests that new roles, new routines, and new social supports are the essence of a successful transition (Laub and Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001; Sampson and Laub 1993).

At the family level, work provides former prisoners with an income, enabling them to provide financial assistance to their familial and social networks. In addition, communities stand to reap measurable economic benefits with the return of former prisoners to the workforce. Not only are these individuals workers, they are also taxpayers and consumers who, by spending a portion of their income, could increase the demand for goods and services in their communities.

The larger society also stands to reap public safety benefits when former prisoners are engaged in legitimate work. While the impact certainly varies because former prisoners all differ with respect to their prior criminal activity, employment may encourage an individual to desist from criminal activity. For an individual who is embedded in a pattern of criminal behavior, it is unlikely that making one aspect of his life more pro-social (i.e., work) will be sufficient to overcome long-term behavioral patterns and pressures to persist with criminal activity. Yet former prisoners who are engaged in lawful work after they have returned to the community are less likely to commit new crimes, thereby enhancing public safety.

Because the link between employment and crime is complicated by other factors, including housing, health care, and drug treatment, employment is only one component of a multifaceted approach to assist returning prisoners. Holding a job is a signal that an individual has made a commitment to change and to become involved in a more prosocial

lifestyle. Getting and holding a job requires a set of skills and attitudes—willingness to follow a schedule, work well with colleagues or team members, and set long-term goals—which are needed to succeed in a variety of activities and responsibilities in society. Efforts to improve the employment outcomes of former prisoners should often be supplemented by quality programming that addresses key areas of need and carefully considers the timing and sequence of these interventions. As research has shown, successful employment-related interventions that engage private-sector employers and former prisoners benefit the former prisoner, his or her family and social networks, communities, and society at large.

THE LABOR MARKET CONTEXT

Examining the impact of America's incarceration policies on the job prospects of former prisoners requires a discussion of the labor market in which this population seeks jobs. In 1997, the male labor force in the United States averaged more than 97.7 million.¹ In that same year, more than 1.1 million men were in the custody of state or federal correctional authorities, representing 1.2 percent of the potential labor force in this country (Gillard and Beck 1998; U.S. Department of Labor 2002).² While many of these individuals were employed prior to their admission to prison, their removal from the labor market while incarcerated, and the restrictions placed on them as a result of their criminal histories, impact the nation's economy. This impact has been estimated to amount to an annual net loss in gross domestic product between \$100 and \$200 billion (Freeman 1992).

There is a missed opportunity to expand the skill sets and employment prospects of prisoners during incarceration. If individuals emerged from prison with fortified skill sets, solid work experience, and connections to legitimate jobs at market wages—wholly better prepared to be more productive than when they entered prison—the prospects for positive outcomes in terms of earnings, family support, self-esteem, and recidivism could be amplified. In this scenario, the experiences of prisoners during incarceration could potentially offset the potential harms that a criminal record and limited skills might pose.

The country tends to focus, however, on the competition for jobs among unemployed workers and not on the potential contributions returning prisoners could make to the nation's economy. Programs aimed at improving the employment prospects of prisoners are sometimes met with concern that these individuals will displace other law-abiding workers. Much like the opposition to migrant labor, a sector of society feels that returning prisoners should not have access to jobs that would otherwise be available to residents who have not spent time in prison.

Anticipated changes in the labor market will undoubtedly affect the employment opportunities available to individuals released from prison. As discussed in this report, the typical job for which a prisoner is prepared is a low-skill, blue collar, or manufacturing job. However, globalization, technological advances, and migrant labor have reduced the number of opportunities in these areas. The market has shifted toward jobs in the service sector—child and elder care, customer service—jobs for which individuals with criminal histories are less likely to be hired or may be legally barred. At the same time, with the retirement of the baby boom generation, it is likely that the labor market will tighten, unemployment rates will fall, and employers will need to develop new sources of labor. Released prisoners could be one of them (Ellwood 2003).

¹ The male labor force includes all non-institutional males age 16 and older.

² An additional 498,678 were incarcerated in local jails. The total number of state and federal prisoners and local jail inmates represents approximately 1.6 percent of the potential labor force (civilian and institutional populations).

The focus on former prisoner employment will occur in the context of an economy that continues to change substantially.³ The wage gap, or the difference in income between workers at the bottom of the wage distribution and those at the top, may continue to widen. Since 1970, earnings among men working full-time at the top of the wage bracket increased 30 percent, while earnings among men working full-time at the bottom of the wage bracket decreased 20 percent. Thus, given that former prisoners are most likely to find jobs at the lower end of the wage bracket, there is reason for concern that their ability to earn a living is limited.

While the U.S.-born workforce grew 44 percent over the past 20 years, it is not projected to increase in size over the next 20 years. Unlike the baby boom generation that was better educated and more highly skilled than previous generations, the next generation to move into the workforce will not bring an increasing share of workers with education beyond high school, nor will the range of skills expand markedly. Thus, given the growth in technology and the increasing number of high-skill occupations, employers will experience shortages in skilled workers. This shift could potentially benefit former prisoners, providing that they have participated in prison programs that develop skills relative to those industry sectors projected to experience labor shortages.

³ This discussion of the economy draws heavily on David Ellwood's presentation, "Where Is the Economy Headed over Time and How Will the Prison Population Be Affected?" (2003).

FORMER PRISONER PROFILE

In addition to understanding the economy and job market to which prisoners return, it is also important to discuss the characteristics and demographics of the prisoner population in order to understand fully the nexus between work and reentry. Perhaps most notable is the size of the current prisoner population, which, at the end of 2002, reached an all-time high of 1.4 million people (Harrison and Beck 2003). This statistic does not include the number of people who have ever been incarcerated, which is estimated at approximately 5.6 million adult U.S. residents, or 1 in every 37 adults in the country (Bonczar 2003). If current incarceration rates remain unchanged, about 1 in 3 black males, 1 in 6 Hispanic males, and 1 in 17 white males are expected to go to prison during their lifetime. The vast majority of the people in prison in 2002 were male (94 percent), black or Hispanic (63 percent), and young (58 percent were age 18 to 34) (Harrison and Beck 2003).

Education Profile

Prisoners have education levels far below the general population. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that among those in state and federal prison in 1997, approximately 40 percent had not completed high school or attained a GED, compared with 18 percent of the general population over age 18 (Harlow 2003). Minorities had lower rates of educational attainment than white inmates—44 percent of black inmates, 53 percent of Hispanic inmates, and 27 percent of white inmates had not completed high school or attained a GED. Among males age 20 to 39, those in prison had markedly lower academic achievement than their counterparts in the general population. Compared with the general population, those in prison were approximately twice as likely not to have completed high school or attained a GED. And four times the number of young males in the general population had attended some college or post-secondary courses compared with incarcerated males.

Although nearly all state, federal, and private prisons offer some type of educational or vocational programming, resources have not kept pace with the increasing prison population. Accordingly, only about half of the total inmate population receives educational or vocational training, a proportion that has been decreasing over time (Harlow 2003; Lynch and Sabol 2001). Courses typically offered through education programs include GED, high school, college, and English as a second language classes. Figure 1 illustrates the rates of participation in various programs by state and federal prisoners. (Often rates of participation in programs are limited by the number of available program slots.) Notably, only about one-third of prisoners receive vocational training designed to improve their ability to obtain legitimate employment once released.

Figure 1. Participation Rates in Educational Programs since Most Recent Admission, 1997

Type of program	State prisoners (%) (n = 1,046,136)	Federal prisoners (%) (n = 87,624)
Total Participating	51.9	56.4
Basic education	3.1	1.9
GED/high school	23.4	23.0
College courses	9.9	12.9
English as a second language	1.2	5.7
Vocational	32.2	31.0
Other	2.6	5.6

Source: Harlow (2003).

Note: Data may not add to total due to rounding or inmates' participation in more than one educational program.

Prior Work Experience and Income

Prior work experience and income are also limited. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Harlow 2003), between 21 and 38 percent of prisoners were unemployed just prior to being incarcerated, depending on their level of educational attainment (figure 2).⁴ Between 57 and 76 percent of prisoners reported receiving income from wages in the month prior to their arrest, with better-educated inmates more likely to report this type of income. Other reported sources of income included family and friends, various forms of government assistance, and illegal sources. Interestingly, the proportion of inmates reporting illegal sources of income did not vary significantly by educational attainment—better educated inmates were no less likely to report illegal earnings than their counterparts who did not have a diploma or GED.

⁴ Official labor statistics exclude persons not looking for work from official unemployment statistics. For our purposes, however, these individuals are included in the percentages of people who were not working prior to incarceration.

Figure 2. Employment and Income in Month Prior to Admission for State Prisoners, 1997 (percent)

	Education level of state prison inmates			
	Less than HS	GED	HS Diploma	Post-secondary/ some college
Employment				
Full-time	47.7	56.4	63.8	69.9
Part-time	14.8	11.9	11.3	9.0
Unemployed	37.5	31.7	24.9	21.0
Income source				
Wages	57.1	64.4	70.7	75.9
Illegal sources	23.3	32.3	24.4	25.9
Family/friends	19.8	20.8	15.9	12.1
Transfer payments	18.4	12.7	14.1	14.8
Welfare	11.0	7.8	7.7	7.5
SSI or Social Security	7.4	3.8	5.3	5.4
Compensation payments	1.5	2.1	2.5	3.6
Investments	0.5	1.4	1.6	7.7
Other	1.4	2.1	2.6	6.9
Personal income				
Less than \$1,000	63.3	51.7	47.4	32.7
\$1,000 to \$1,999	21.6	25.9	29.5	28.7
\$2,000 to \$4,999	8.9	13.2	14.6	24.8
\$5,000 or more	6.3	9.2	8.5	13.8
Homeless in year prior to admission	11.6	10.6	10.0	8.2

Source: Harlow (2003).

Note: Data may not add to total due to rounding or inmates having more than one income source.

Between one-third and two-thirds of inmates reported personal income of less than \$1,000 in the month prior to their arrest. Even at the higher end of the education scale (i.e., those with some education beyond high school), only 39 percent reported income above \$2,000 per month, and only 15 percent of those who did not have a diploma or GED reported earnings at this level. Thus, not only are prisoners less educated than their same-age counterparts in the general population, they also report high rates of unemployment, dependence on sources of illegal earnings, and relatively low monthly earnings.

Physical Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Issues

The challenges posed by mental health conditions, physical ailments, and substance abuse problems also complicate the employment issues of prisoners. As shown in figure 3, a significant proportion of state prisoners have serious medical, mental health, and substance abuse problems that may limit their readiness or ability to participate in the

labor market. In most cases, the prevalence of these problems significantly exceeds that found among the general U.S. population, particularly with regard to communicable diseases such as HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis B and C, and tuberculosis (Hammett, Roberts, and Kennedy 2001). Substance use is also widely prevalent among the prison population. While not always signifying an addiction, chronic substance use often leads to problems maintaining a job and can interfere with participation in productive, prosocial activities.

Figure 3. Proportion of State Prison Inmates with Medical, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Problems.

Type of problem	Proportion (%)
Medical (a)	
Some physical impairment or mental condition	31
Condition that limits ability to work	21
HIV+ (b)	2
Confirmed AIDS cases (b)	0.5
Mental Health (c)	
Reported mental illness or emotional condition	10
Ever had overnight stay in psychiatric hospital	11
Taken prescribed medication for emotional problem	19
Received professional counseling for emotional problem	22
Substance Use (d)	
Regular drug use ever prior to incarceration	70
Drug use in month before arrest	57
Drug use at time of offense	33
Alcohol use at time of offense	37

Sources: (a) Maruschak and Beck 2001. (b) Maruschak 2003. (c) Ditton 1999. (d) Mumola 1999.

Research has shown that inmates who participate in treatment programs for substance abuse are less likely to reoffend upon their release, as compared with inmates who do not participate (Gaes et al. 1999). Despite these results, and the sizable number of offenders with substance abuse issues, only a small—and declining—portion of inmates receive alcohol and drug treatment during incarceration (figure 4). In 1997, 10 percent of state prisoners and 9 percent of federal prisoners reported participating in formal treatment (e.g., residential programs, professional counseling, or detoxification) since their admission to prison, compared with 25 percent and 16 percent, respectively, in 1991 (Mumola 1999). Thus it is clear that any effort to improve the employment outcomes of former prisoners will also need to address the medical, mental health, and substance abuse issues that can interfere with the ability to obtain and maintain a job.

Figure 4. Program Participation among State Prison Inmates since Admission

Type of program	Participation (%)
Mental health counseling from trained professional (a)	13%
Substance abuse treatment (b)	10%
Self-help group, peer counseling, drug education (b)	20%

Sources: (a) Maruschak and Beck 2001. (b) Mumola 1999.

Length of Stay in Prison

Today's inmates are spending a longer period behind bars than their counterparts as recently as 10 years ago. Among inmates released from prison in 1999, the average time served in prison for the current offense was 29 months, compared with 22 months served by those released from prison in 1990 (Hughes, Wilson, and Beck 2001). Further, the proportion of soon-to-be-released inmates who reported serving more than five years nearly doubled, increasing from 13 percent in 1991 to 21 percent in 1997 (Lynch and Sabol 2001). These longer periods of incarceration are likely problematic for persons seeking employment after release, since time spent in prison is time spent away from potential contacts and job networks, and is time during which job skills, work habits, and current technical knowledge are likely to erode. Research has shown that after being incarcerated for long periods of time, former prisoners indeed have lost many of their networks or contacts that could help them find a job (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Time in prison may also have strengthened ties to antisocial peer groups, and as a consequence, restricted awareness of or access to legitimate work opportunities.

Limited Job Prospects

Given this profile, it appears that the job prospects for former prisoners are limited at best.⁵ Individuals with little work experience and low levels of education face difficulty in the job market, which is compounded by a mismatch between employer expectations and former prisoners' qualifications, and employer preferences for workers without criminal histories.

Employment outcomes of former prisoners are hindered by a disconnect between the expectations and attitudes of employers and the characteristics and circumstances of the typical former prisoner. Most (95 percent) unskilled jobs require a high school diploma or some work experience (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2003b). Yet employers' expectations seem inconsistent with former prisoners' qualifications, as a large portion of former prisoners do not have a high school diploma (40 percent), were unemployed prior to

⁵ This section draws heavily on the following Roundtable papers: Freeman (2003), available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410857>, and Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2003b), available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410855>.

incarceration (20 to 40 percent), and have persistent health and mental health concerns (10 to 22 percent) that contribute to their failure to report to work.

In addition, some former prisoners also make choices that further limit their employment outcomes. For a variety of reasons, including low pay, few benefits, and the lack of job advancement afforded by many jobs, many former prisoners choose illegal opportunities or more informal work arrangements. Jobs with few tangible rewards also do not engender a sense of commitment and are likely to be viewed as temporary. Moving from job to job does little to remediate the spotty work history of many former prisoners, and feeds into employers' reluctance to hire individuals who may move on to another position after only a few months.

Communities that receive large concentrations of released prisoners are already struggling with high rates of unemployment and poverty and a dearth of available jobs. The disparity between the residences of returning offenders and the location of skill-appropriate jobs has been termed a "spatial mismatch." Increased numbers of prisoners are released to large metropolitan areas that have lost a share of the labor market to outlying suburbs (Brennan and Hill 1999). For example, over a 20-year period ending in the mid-1990s, employment opportunities in the outlying suburbs of Cleveland grew by 121 percent, compared with only 2 percent within the city of Cleveland (Lynch and Sabol 2001). In addition, the proportion of relatively low-skill but higher-wage jobs (e.g., manufacturing) declined from 30 to 15 percent of all employment (Bania, Coulton, and Leete 2000). Many of these urban areas also absorbed large numbers of workers leaving welfare, who have similar levels of education and prior work experience, and therefore may compete with former prisoners for the available jobs.

Further, surveys of potential employers have documented reluctance to hire workers with criminal records. More specifically (Holzer et al. 2003b) reported that:

- Employers were least likely to hire former prisoners compared with other disadvantaged groups, such as welfare recipients;
- Employers were more likely to hire former prisoners for construction and manufacturing jobs than those in the retail or service sectors, which required significant contact with customers;
- Employers' attitudes varied depending on the offense committed by the former prisoner and whether any relevant work experience had been acquired since release. Employers were most reluctant to hire individuals convicted of violent crimes, and were more willing to hire low-level drug offenders; and
- The practice of conducting a criminal background check was far from universal, but is more prevalent now than in the past decade.

One's status as a former prisoner causes concern among potential employers for several reasons. First, there are a number of occupations in which state or federal law

bars a person with a felony conviction from holding them, such as those caring for children, certain health services, private security firms, real estate, and virtually all law enforcement and other criminal justice positions. Second, employers can be held liable for damage incurred as a result of exposing other employees and the public to the potentially dangerous situation created by hiring an individual with a criminal record. Recently, employers have lost 72 percent of negligent hiring cases, holding them responsible for the loss, pain, and suffering of victims at an average of \$1.6 million (Connerley, Arvey, and Bernardy 2001). With the danger of a lawsuit and the historical record of judgments against employers, some employers have decided that hiring former prisoners is simply not worth the risk.

In addition, some employers further discriminate against a large number of former prisoners because of their race or other minority status. A recent study sent pairs of individuals to apply for the same entry-level job. One applicant had a criminal record, while the other did not. The study found that applicants with criminal records experienced a 50 percent reduction in job offers compared to those without (Pager 2003). The study's findings also indicated that the presence of a criminal history further compounds racial bias—African-American applicants with criminal records experienced a 64 percent reduction in job offers (Pager 2003).

These individual challenges, legal barriers, and societal biases restrict the job market for former prisoners. Meanwhile, information on how well former prisoners fare in this job market is sparse. One study estimated the employment rates among young men who had previously been incarcerated to be approximately 20 to 25 percentage points lower than those of their non-criminal justice involved counterparts (Freeman 1992). A study of California parolees found that only 21 percent had a full-time job, 9 percent had “casual” jobs, and 70 percent were unemployed (California Department of Corrections 1997). Another small-scale study found that while one-third of released prisoners in New York City found a job in the mainstream labor market within 30 days of release, most of these individuals were hired by former employers or received help in their job search from family and friends. Very few found jobs on their own or through the assistance of an employment program for former prisoners (Nelson, Deess, and Allen 1999). Furthermore, even after they enter the job market, former prisoners often earn less than other workers with comparable demographics (Freeman 1999; Western 2002).

Thus, America's criminal justice policies have a significant impact on the job prospects of a large segment of the population. Despite the discouraging picture that emerges from the profile of former prisoners and the restricted opportunities of the labor market, there is reason to be optimistic. The nation's correctional system has a long history of providing work opportunities and work readiness programs that, when combined with transitional work programs after release, lay the foundation for real job opportunities upon release.

WORK EXPERIENCE WHILE IN PRISON

Historical Context

Throughout American corrections history, the experience of prison has been intertwined with work. Inmate labor was introduced to prisons in 1682, when Pennsylvania declared, “All prisons shall be work-houses” (Garvey 1998). According to the Quakers, who created the American penitentiary, work was integral to the reformative process. With the expansion of prisons in the early 19th century, inmate labor was seen as cheap labor that could be sold to private firms, which would then sell the goods on the open market.⁶ While this system of contract labor had become dominant throughout the country, by the end of the 19th century, a collaborative movement brought this system to an end; Congress restricted the sale of prison-made goods, thereby limiting inmate labor to producing goods used by the states.

In 1934, Congress authorized the Federal Prison Industries (FPI) to develop industry programs much like those in state prisons within the federal prison system. These programs were implemented with the principal goal of generating revenues that would offset the costs of incarceration and contribute to the payment of restitution, child support, and funds for crime victims. The goods and services federal inmates produced through these programs were—and still are today—sold to federal agencies, which are mandated to purchase a portion of their required goods from the FPI. (Federal Prison Industries 1996)

Several decades later, in an effort to loosen the restrictions Congress had imposed on state prison-made goods, Congress passed the Justice System Improvement Act in 1979, which created the Prison Industry Enhancement (PIE) program. The PIE program effectively encouraged state prison systems to develop partnerships with private companies to produce goods using inmate labor. The underlying goal was to create employment opportunities for prisoners that approximated private-sector work opportunities.

Federal Prison Industries

In 2001, the FPI's gross sales amounted to \$583 million, although it profited only \$4 million—an improvement from a \$12.8 million loss in 2000. Some suggest the program's focus on low-wage jobs, which aims to maximize the number of inmates who can be employed, contributes to low profits (Atkinson and Rostad 2003). Inmate wages are very low, averaging \$0.23 to \$1.15 per hour.

Prison Industry Enhancement

In 2002, the PIE program included 188 partnerships with private companies and employed only 3,734 inmates, or less than three-tenths of 1 percent of the total prison population (Enterprise Prison Institute 2002; National Correctional Industries Association 2003). While many states are moving toward expanding the role of private companies in state prisons, the pace has been slow and the targeted employment rates are conservative. Recent PIE assessments suggest that this is in part because programs struggle paying inmates wages that are comparable to those of civilian workers in similar industries (Auerbach 2001).

⁶ Further discussion of this history can be found in Travis (forthcoming).

Work Assignments in Prison

Today, while only a small share of inmates obtain employment through the FPI or the PIE program, nearly half of the state inmate population and almost all of the federal inmate population have some sort of work assignment while incarcerated (figure 5). And yet for the most part, these jobs do not always provide work experience that appeals to employers on the outside.

Figure 5. Inmate Work Assignments in State and Federal Prisons, 2000

	State	Percentage of eligible population	Federal ^a	Percentage of eligible population	Total	Percentage of eligible population
General work	394,599	39.4	77,785	78.3	472,384	43.1
Farm work	29,920	3.0	150	0.2	30,070	2.7
Traditional industries	52,708	5.3	21,404	21.5	77,643	7.1
PIE program	3,531	0.3	~	~	3,531	0.3
Total work assignments	480,758		99,339		580,097	
Total eligible population	1,000,851		94,143		1,094,991	
Percentage of eligible population with work assignments	48		100		53	
Total population	1,091,788		117,949		1,209,737	

Source: Adapted from Corrections Yearbook 2000.

Notes: Data exclude 90,940 state inmates and 23,806 federal inmates who are considered under restrictive status. These inmates are not eligible for work assignments.

^aAll federal inmates are required to have a work assignment.

In 2000, there were approximately 1.1 million state and federal inmates eligible to work (i.e., not on security- or medical-restricted status). Of these, 53 percent had a work assignment—43 percent were assigned to general institutional maintenance, 7 percent to traditional industries programs, and 3 percent to farming or agricultural work. Clearly, general institutional maintenance jobs, such as janitorial and laundry labor, remain the dominant form of work in state prisons.

The few inmates who are assigned to industry work in state prisons (7 percent) primarily hold jobs in traditional prison industries, which include garment assembly,

furniture, license plates, metal fabrication, printing, agriculture, and janitorial labor. These jobs are more prevalent in federal prisons, where approximately 31 percent of jobs are in the clothing and textile industries, 24 percent in office furniture, and 15 percent in electronics (U.S. Department of Justice 2002). While many work assignments aid the operation of prisons and employ inmates, they do not always add to an inmate's repertoire of marketable skills. However, the work experience itself, which involves showing up on time, working well in a team setting, and responding to supervisors, has inherent value for prisoners once they are released, as they will need to demonstrate to private-sector employers that they possess the attributes of a good employee.

Benefits of Allowing Inmates to Work

At the most basic level, allowing inmates to work reduces inmate idleness and fosters a sense of productivity among prisoners.⁷ Employment of any sort—from institutional maintenance to industry programs—is beneficial from this perspective. Inmate labor, particularly a prison industries program, also has the potential to contribute positively to the operation of prisons, the development of inmates' skills, and the ability of businesses to access a large labor pool. Full implementation of a prison industries program could also provide significant cost-savings in the operating budget of the criminal justice system.

Research has suggested that prison labor programs offer prison administrators an effective management tool, and can lead to reductions in misconduct, violence, and disturbances among the prisoner population. In one study, conducted by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, inmates in prison industry programs were less likely to be involved in institutional misconduct (Saylor and Gaes 1992). Since the passage of a 1995 voter referendum requiring state prisoners to work 40 hours per week, the Oregon Department of Corrections has reported a 60 percent reduction in major disciplinary reports (as a disciplinary report can result in expulsion from popular work assignments) (Butterfield 2001).

Work programs also benefit inmates, who have the opportunity to develop job-specific skills and workplace habits while incarcerated, thereby addressing deficits in their pre-prison employment histories. Wages earned from prison-based employment may enable inmates to contribute financially to their families at home. The ability to make such contributions and participate in a productive environment may benefit inmates emotionally and psychologically. Further, research has shown that inmates involved in employment programs are less likely to be rearrested upon release and more likely to obtain employment in the period following their release from prison (Canestrini 1993; Lattimore, Witte, and Baker 1990; Saylor and Gaes 1992, 1999). A meta-analysis of corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs found that program participants recidivate at a lower rate and are employed at a higher rate than non-

⁷ This section draws heavily on the following paper: Atkinson and Rostad 2003. Available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410854>.

participants (Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie 2000). In fact, the analysis suggested that program participants are twice as likely to find employment after release than non-participants.

The private businesses that sustain prison industry partnerships also stand to reap benefits from these arrangements. A recent survey of inmate employers found that the quality of the prisoner workforce was the principal factor that sustained business-prison partnerships (Enterprise Prison Institute 2002). In addition, employers reported that prison industry programs provided valuable training in areas including teamwork, dependability, communication skills, and general job readiness.

While research suggests that prison industry programs show promise for prison administrators, inmates, and key stakeholders, the concerns of workers who might be displaced by the inmate population have disproportionately influenced important discussions on the expansion of prison industry programs.

Barriers to Implementing Prison-Based Work Programs

Although prison industries got their start producing goods for private companies, organized labor and businesses have raised concerns about unfair competition, worker displacement, and the propriety of providing jobs to prisoners in periods of high national unemployment. Opposition from a number of different sectors—labor, business, prisoners’ rights advocates—has led to an impasse in which the full potential of prison work programs has yet to be achieved. Concerns that bringing these programs to scale could result in a loss of private-sector jobs and contracts stymied the full implementation of the FPI and PIE programs. Legislative restrictions, including limits on the marketing and sale of prison-made goods, prerequisites for consulting local businesses, and admonitions that local economies and workers not be adversely affected, have presented challenges to the programs’ success.

In addition to the constraints that policies and procedures place on prison industries, logistical barriers also prevent prison work programs from being implemented on a national scale (Piehl 2003). Oregon provides a case study of the challenges that surround implementing inmate work programs. In 1994, Oregon voters passed the Prison Reform and Inmate Work Act, commonly known as Ballot Measure 17. This measure required all inmates to be involved in full-time work or on-the-job training. Certain categories of inmates were excluded from this requirement—those in intake, or in security or medical segregation. In practice, an activity counts toward the 40-hour work requirement if it involves work, education, training, or substance abuse treatment, although no more than half of the time can be spent in an activity other than work. Key barriers to implementation included the following:

- A lack of space to employ all inmates on site and insufficient funds to cover associated costs;

- Insufficient private partnerships to provide meaningful work to all inmates;
- Opposition from local businesses and residents that found themselves competing with the DOC for contracts and jobs; and
- Inconsistency between state requirements and federal PIE certification requirements that restrict the potential for interstate commerce (Pens 1998).

In the eight years since Measure 17 was implemented, the state has overcome many of these challenges. Oregon Correctional Enterprises operates production shops in embroidery, farm fabrication, furnishings, GIS data conversion, graphic design, laundry, metal fabrication, signage, and telecommunications, among others. Outside work crews are used by many public agencies, including the Department of Transportation, the Food Bank, fire departments, parks departments, and forest services.

In addition to the challenges that the Oregon example highlights, the clashes that arise from the combination of a system focused on control (prisons) and an entrepreneurial system focused on leveraging market opportunities (private businesses) can also be discouraging (Atkinson and Rostad 2003). A survey of inmate employers found that their experiences with the prison environment and its bureaucracy were the primary sources of their dissatisfaction (Enterprise Prison Institute 2002). Often the operational requirements of prisons can affect industry program goals and objectives.

While many issues must be resolved before these programs can be brought to scale, in the meantime a large proportion of the state and federal prison population remains idle and without the opportunity to gain the skills or basic work experience that might enhance their likelihood of obtaining gainful employment once released. As the costs of imprisonment continue to increase, the labor resources available in U.S. prisons are not being fully tapped.

WORK ON THE OUTSIDE

In previous sections, the monograph explored the labor market to which former prisoners return, as well as the limits placed on their job prospects. And the last section highlighted the lack of opportunities for prisoners during the incarceration period. Now the discussion shifts to the realities of finding work upon release, focusing largely on programs already noteworthy for successfully placing former prisoners into jobs.

The period immediately following release from prison is challenging. Returning prisoners need to find housing, secure health care, and reconnect with families. Finding work—earning income—is critical. According to an exploratory study of 49 individuals leaving prison in New York State, “the number one concern for most of the people in the study was landing a job. Throughout the first month after release from prison, people consistently were more preoccupied with finding work than avoiding drugs and other illegal activity or staying in good health” (Nelson et al. 1999).

In addition to the challenges already cited, a general reluctance among employers to hire individuals with criminal records also hinders a former prisoner’s job search. At the same time, recent evidence from employer surveys suggests that employers may be encouraged to hire former prisoners under the right circumstances, particularly in cases where the potential employee was convicted of a nonviolent or drug-related offense and has been drug-free and gained work experience after incarceration (Holzer et al. 2003a). Further, employers express a greater willingness to hire former prisoners when there is a third party intermediary agency that will provide ongoing support (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000b). Intermediary agencies provide frequent and direct contact with the individual, on-going contact with the employer, and collateral contacts with the former prisoners’ families. Some agencies also provide drug testing, referrals for social services, and resources for concrete supports, such as transportation, child care, clothing, and food, so that problems in these areas do not interfere with the individual’s ability to continue working (see sidebar).

After Prison: Roadblocks To Reentry

A Report on State Legal Barriers Facing People with Criminal Records

This recent report by the National HIRE Network documents the legal barriers that former prisoners face upon their return to free society. The report is organized in three sections, first cataloguing each state’s legal obstacles to employment, housing, benefits, voting, access to criminal records, parenting, and driving. Next, the “Report Card” grades each state based on the extent to which state policies help or hinder the reentry process. And finally the report presents state and federal policy recommendations that might improve the reintegration process for former prisoners.

Among its findings, the report indicates that over the past 20 years, Congress and state legislators have imposed new restrictions on eligibility for public benefits, student loans, and drivers’ licenses. Specifically, most states permit employer discrimination against individuals with criminal histories, restrict a former prisoner’s right to vote, and impede a former prisoner’s eligibility determinations for public assistance and food stamps.

The report is available at the National HIRE Network’s website <http://www.hirenetwork.org>.

Key Elements of Focus for Post-release Intermediary Agencies

- Provide in-custody access to counseling, training, education, vocational programs, and jobs to remediate existing deficits in these areas.
- Prepare for release by assembling needed documents (social security cards, copies of GED or high school diplomas, transcripts, vocational training certificates, etc.), polishing interview skills, and providing guidance on how to present criminal justice history and instruction on how to use job search resources.
- Focus on motivation, envisioning new roles and self-concepts, identifying signals of readiness that can be used to demonstrate commitment to a job, and nurturing the commitment to change.
- Provide for a gradual transition from the “total institution” structure of the prison environment to an open schedule that depends on self-direction and self-discipline.
- Offer support during critical days following release and immediate access to income.
- Attend to compatibility between former prisoners’ temperament and skills and the requirements of available jobs.
- Supplement criminal justice supervision with nonpunitive, problem-solving assistance.
- Develop resources for concrete supports such as transportation, interview clothes and work clothes, child care, housing, and food.
- Create a well-developed network of potential employers in a diversity of job markets; emphasize those that are convenient to former prisoners’ places of residence and easily accessible by public transportation.
- Cultivate employer satisfaction through frequent contact and willingness to mediate conflicts and solve problems related to the offender’s ability to report to work consistently and on time, to work as a team, to take direction and constructive criticism, etc.
- Coordinate job and criminal justice commitments to minimize interference with job responsibilities while maintaining the benefits of supervision.
- Focus on job retention so that ex-offenders build a solid work history that can be used to attract future opportunities.

Source: Drawn primarily from Finn (1997, 1998a, and 1998b), published as part of a collaborative effort by the National Institute of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Correctional Education.

Post-prison Employment Programs

Programs designed to increase sound job prospects for returning prisoners approach this task from both supply and demand perspectives (Bushway and Reuter 1999). Supply-side issues revolve around increasing the attractiveness of former prisoners to potential employers by (1) improving former prisoners’ self-presentation skills through interview rehearsals and resume preparation, (2) enhancing their potential productivity through specific-skill building programs or job training, (3) increasing their reliability through job readiness programs and apprenticeship arrangements, and (4) alleviating some of the logistical challenges that interfere with the ability to hold a job through the provision of concrete supports such as transportation, child care, and housing assistance.

Demand-side issues revolve around reducing the costs, both tangible and intangible, absorbed by employers hiring former prisoners. These can include screening potential employees to ensure suitability, providing supervision and case management of employees, and leveraging wage supplements or subsidized bonds.

Effective programs in this area typically provide intensive job placement services, combined with ongoing monitoring to intervene and assist with problems that could jeopardize former prisoner's placement. In addition, these programs rely on an extensive network of employers who have demonstrated their willingness to hire former prisoners.

It is important to note that employment programs for former prisoners are few and far between. While there are a number of employment placement and training programs—such as One-Stop centers—operating throughout the country, they have not historically focused on former prisoners (although they typically accept them). Nonetheless, valuable lessons can be learned from other efforts to employ hard-to-employ populations, such as former welfare recipients (see sidebar). In addition, several specialized programs have demonstrated success in linking former prisoners to jobs, among them are the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) in New York City, Safer Foundation in Chicago, and Re-Integration of Offenders Program (Project RIO) in Texas.

Unfortunately, the geographic limitations and capacity restrictions of such programs cannot begin to accommodate the level of need generated by the 630,000 prisoners released to society each year. However, collectively, they offer insight to critical dimensions of successful strategies targeting the employment challenges for prisoners reentering the community and can be useful to the efforts to bring such programs to scale.

The CEO program offers a unique focus on two key reentry needs: immediate support during the critical days following release and immediate access to income. An important dimension of The Safer Foundation is the

Learning from Welfare to Work

The welfare population shares many similarities with the former prisoner population: low educational attainment, sporadic work histories, mental health and medical issues—persons generally considered “hard to employ.” However, welfare reform has helped many of these individuals find work—about two-thirds of people receiving welfare assistance find work within one year (Carroll 2003).

In the seven years since the major reforms were made, a number of important issues have surfaced.

There is much debate about which components of work programs should have precedence. The “work first” principal holds that moving people quickly into jobs—from dependence to independence—should be the priority (Cove 2003). However, there is also evidence that ensuring that workers are adequately trained and prepared to enter the workforce can enhance employer satisfaction and improve job retention rates (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000). Clearly, there must be a balance between these two goals.

Job retention—as well as job placement—warrants attention. Between 60 and 65 percent of the Welfare to Work Partnership employers find that their welfare hires remain on the job at least as long as their non-welfare hires (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000a). Reducing employee turnover is a priority for employers, and intermediary agencies should focus on preparing workers to stay on the job.

Transportation and child care are major issues that require additional federal, state, or local support to ensure they do not interfere with employment goals (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000a).

While a number of financial incentives are available (e.g., bonding, tax credits), they do not generally change employers' hiring habits (Cove 2003). They tend to serve as “icing on the cake” for employers who are already willing to hire hard-to-employ populations, but are not powerful incentives for those who have indicated their resistance.

A number of organizations have tracked the success of the Welfare-to-Work initiative and have created useful documents that can guide efforts to bring former prisoners into the workforce (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000a). Among these are documents outlining important legislation that could be passed to further support the movement of welfare-dependent individuals into the workforce and guides for employers containing solutions to common challenges associated with hiring former welfare recipients, such as child care, health care, mentoring, substance abuse, and personal financial responsibility.

emphasis it places on job retention: holding onto a job for a significant period of time signals commitment, discipline, and responsibility—characteristics that employers highly value. A great contributor to the demonstrated success of Project RIO is the central position of a well-established, highly respected employment agency with access to a large network of potential employers and existing infrastructure for statewide coverage. Each of these programs supplies a transitional experience for its clients—in the form of job placement assistance beginning in prison and continuing after release, or in the form of a subsidized work experience that relieves former prisoners of the immediate stressors of income and structure.

The Center for Employment Opportunities

The *Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)* in New York City provides immediate transitional employment services for parolees (including individuals released from a shock incarceration or boot camp program), probationers, or sentenced inmates released from local jails. The long-term goal of the program is the placement of former prisoners in permanent, full-time, unsubsidized positions paying above the minimum wage and providing a solid benefit package. Participants undergo job readiness and job interview training in order to put returning prisoners to work immediately. In addition, they are also assessed for needed support services such as housing, clothing, child care, and documentation (e.g., birth certificate, driver's license, etc.). In addition to the supported work component, all participants meet weekly with an employment specialist, and once placed, they are monitored for up to one year. Within two to three months, 60 percent of participants are placed in permanent jobs.

Source: Finn 1998a.

Note: This section also draws on correspondence with Mindy Tarlow, Director of The Center for Employment Opportunities, on August 26, 2004.

The Safer Foundation

As the nation's largest community-based provider of employment services to former prisoners, Chicago's *Safer Foundation* provides both prison-based and reentry services to offenders and ex-offender in the Chicago or Quad Cities area of Illinois and Iowa. The Safer Foundation works with the Illinois Department of Correction to provide reentry services to offenders housed in two adult transition centers (ATCs) and the Sheridan Correctional Facility. While in custody, prisoners attend basic education and life skills classes. Post-release services also include basic skills classes, as well as intensive job placement assistance from employment specialists. Once the client has been placed, employment specialists follow up with the participant and the employer for 30 days. After this initial period, specialized case managers provide assistance with any emerging problems over a one-year period.

Of particular note is the Safer Foundation's emphasis on job retention. The definition of "job placement" requires a minimum of 30 days on the job. More than 40 percent of the Safer Foundation's clients remain employed after six months.

Source: Finn 1998b.

Project Reintegration of Offenders

Texas's *Project Reintegration of Offender (RIO)* is operated through the state's employment agency, the Texas Workforce Commission. Clients are identified through state prison schools and parole officers. Assessment specialists develop an employment plan that reflects available jobs and occupation demands in the community to which the prisoner will be released, with a major emphasis placed on helping prisoners secure the various forms of documentation required for employment. An employability and life skills program, supported by a series of seven workbooks, helps prepare inmates for their job search. RIO stays involved with its clients during their entire period of supervision, although the intensity diminishes as their situations stabilize. At the outset, employment specialists also make contact with employers by phone at 30, 60, and 90-day intervals.

Source: Finn 1997.

Additional Factors Influencing Employment Opportunities

While prison-to-work programs likely contribute to improved employment outcomes for returning prisoners, there is also an array of factors that can complicate the search process and job retention for this population. While some issues, such as job placement and training, can be addressed with transition-oriented programming, other issues, such as conditions of parole or other supervising agency, may hinder employment. Further, the current economy and local labor market can also influence a returning prisoner's employment outcomes.

Parole Conditions

Today, individuals on probation or parole represent nearly 71 percent of all persons under correctional supervision (Glaze 2002). And over 80 percent of those who leave prison are placed on parole. Yet prisoners, even those who were employed while in prison, are often released to a supervising agency that provides little or no assistance with job placement. In addition, other conditions of parole, such as curfews and parole officer meetings, may interrupt a parolee's work schedule, presenting challenges for job attendance, punctuality, and performance. Meeting these potentially incongruent conditions of parole potentially jeopardizes long-term employment.

Motivation

Researchers and practitioners agree that a necessary first step in the process of desistance is a conscious decision to refrain from criminal activity.⁸ Once this decision is made, the individual then must learn new skills and must be open to taking on new roles and self-concepts, such as that of an employee. This suggests that employment programs will be helpful only to those former prisoners who are motivated to turn their lives around. In this way, employment indicates a fundamental change, but is not the agent of that change.

Therefore, the positive results demonstrated by successful programs may be due to the voluntary nature of program participation by individuals who have already harnessed the motivation to end their criminal careers. If this is true, the real potential of employment programs for former prisoners lies in their ability to work with those ready to change, and, importantly, to motivate individuals to change their lives, using training, new skills, and jobs as tools toward this end. Employment may do this by giving former prisoners new self-images—rather than offenders, they are breadwinners, valued employees, and contributors to the local and national economies. Regardless, the personal motivations of former prisoners play a noteworthy role in individual outcomes and program evaluations.

⁸ This section draws heavily on the work of Bushway (2003), available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410853>.

Job Retention

Even for those former prisoners who do find employment, job retention can still be an issue. While job placement statistics among many post-prison programs are impressive, statistics on job retention are less so. Take the case of CEO in New York City, which documented a job retention rate among those originally placed at 75 percent after one month. This proportion dropped to 60 percent after three months. After six months, only 38 percent of program participants held the same positions. These results are not encouraging given that among the key challenges of this population is the lack of commitment to employers over a significant period of time. This commitment is one of the key qualities that employers seek. From this perspective, former prisoners can increase their chances of long-term success by getting and keeping one job for an extended period of time (Bushway 2003).

Case Management

Case management plays a central role among successful employment programs for former prisoners—from pre-placement guidance, support during placement, and continuing supervision for a substantial period after the client obtains a job. Whether by phone, in-person, or during the course of a home visit, case managers and employment specialists monitor their clients' progress and offer assistance with issues such as the need for transportation or child care, substance abuse treatment, adjustment to imposed schedules, conflict management, and resolution of scheduling conflicts between job responsibilities and conditions of parole or post-prison supervision. All of these issues potentially distract former prisoners from their commitments to their jobs, and if left unattended will likely disrupt the stability gained from obtaining employment.

Case management also benefits former prisoners because it increases the pool of participating employers. Not only does pre-employment interaction provide an opportunity to screen clients for job readiness, it also increases the likelihood for a successful match between the individual and the demands of a particular job. The connection of intermediary agencies, like CEO, RIO, and the Safer Foundation, to local criminal justice agencies means that while the employers do not have to concern themselves with these issues, they have direct access to intermediaries when concerns arise. Finally, because a satisfied employer will be more likely to hire future program clients, efforts to ensure their comfort with the arrangement, responsiveness to their concerns, and the ability to mediate and resolve logistical or interpersonal conflicts is essential to the ongoing success of the program.

LOOKING FORWARD

The threads of a new vision for the transition from prison to work are present in what we know about the employment-related needs of prisoners, the current opportunities and restrictions on work in prisons, the concerns of potential employers, and the essential elements of the handful of programs that have shown promising post-release employment outcomes. The challenge remains to weave these threads together into an integrated whole—one that maximizes the opportunities for learning, experience, and skill-building that are present during incarceration, and one that features a seamless transition to work beyond the prison walls.

As we know from the array of reentry strategies that have been implemented to date, the prison-to-work trajectory should have its foundation within the prison walls, should provide for transition to the community, and should include a plan for the long-term maintenance of any progress made. Current knowledge of the economy, the labor market, and the expectations of employers should also inform a strategy to prepare former prisoners to succeed within the local labor market.

Enhance Work Opportunities Inside Prison

Providing prisoners with marketable work opportunities and employment-related programming more effectively uses the incarceration period. The prison term is an opportunity to address deficiencies with respect to education, technical and vocational skills, and employment history. If these issues are dealt with while the prisoner is still on the inside, then he or she will be better prepared and more likely to secure gainful employment on the outside.

Enhancing the quantity and quality of work opportunities available in prison also requires a policy agenda that assigns priority to prison employment. A legislative mandate for inmate employment would realign the traditional goals of the prison system to be more compatible with the broader societal goal of improved reentry. If work in prison was assigned a greater heuristic purpose and job opportunities were structured to provide more marketable experience, post-release employment outcomes would likely be improved. By contrast, employing large numbers of prisoners to general institutional maintenance jobs, which do not necessarily help prisoners develop useful job skills, does not necessarily meet broader goals of improved reentry and enhanced public safety.

In considering ways to improve work opportunities for prisoners, it is clear that federal legislation regarding prison industries deserves attention. Employment offerings in the federal prison system should be realigned to focus on higher-skill industry sectors. In this way, inmates can learn skills that will be marketable to local businesses upon release. In addition, the PIE could also be greatly improved; unless the program is expanded to serve beyond 0.3 percent of the state prisoner population, which it does currently, it is virtually ineffective. Modifications to federal legislation that would

enhance and increase the partnerships between private companies and state prisons would help the PIE realize its potential. For example, if federal restrictions on the interstate transportation of goods produced in state prisons are removed, partnerships with state prisons are much more attractive to private companies. In addition, greater cooperation from prison administrators, which could be encouraged by creating a range of incentives based on the goal of full employment, would also support these partnerships.

Expand Work Opportunities Outside Prison

In addition to creating opportunities within the prison walls that prepare inmates for gainful employment once released, structured mechanisms that assist former prisoners in negotiating the days and weeks immediately following release and in transitioning to full-time employment are extremely important.

Transitional Work

The period immediately following release from prison is filled with difficult tasks, from securing housing and reuniting with families, to meeting the conditions of supervision and becoming financially self-sufficient. Given that all prisoners are released with a similar constellation of immediate challenges, transitional programs that connect former prisoners to job placement agencies and work opportunities in the community are just as important as in-custody employment. Not only do these jobs provide daily access to legal wages, but they also offer the secondary benefits of ready-made structure and additional supervision. One option is to embrace the CEO model of transitional employment, keeping in mind that for some former prisoners, employment may not be his or her top priority immediately upon release, but instead it may be attending to health needs or finding drug treatment. Nonetheless, creating links between work on the inside and work on the outside is extremely important.

Full-Time Work

After a former prisoner is placed in a transitional work experience, plans for a long-term job assignment should begin. Even after full-time work is secured, Welfare to Work teaches an important lesson: placing a hard-to-employ individual into a job that does not lift the worker out of poverty cannot be considered a success. Post-release employment programs, therefore, should be focused on placing former prisoners in jobs that pay reasonable wages and offer opportunities for salary increases and promotion.

The efforts of the Welfare to Work Partnership also illustrate successful strategies to recruit the support of local employers. The partnership includes 20,000 companies that have provided jobs to 1.1 million former welfare recipients (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000b). Supported by changes in federal legislation and encouragement from the Executive Office, the success of the partnership relied in large part on the network of businesses that communicated their positive experiences hiring former welfare recipients to their peers. A similar mechanism is needed to advance the goals of a prison-to-work

initiative. Two important realizations will likely need to occur before such an initiative is to become successful: 1) former prisoners can make good, productive workers, and 2) job retention rates among this population should closely mirror the rates among non-criminal justice involved workers.

Ensuring that former prisoners contribute positively to their employers' environments will be an important factor in a prison-to-work initiative. This will depend on prisoners' access to effective programming and attractive job assignments during incarceration, and transitional support upon release. In addition, intermediary agencies can work with former prisoners to hone interpersonal skills and offer support with issues that might interfere with an employee's ability to meet his work-related obligations.

Placing emphasis on job retention will also contribute to a prison-to-work initiative's success. Job retention benefits multiple parties—the employee (who will build a more impressive résumé with long-term positions), the employer (who avoids the costs associated with employee turnover), and the intermediary agency (which can maximize its resources to help a greater volume of former prisoners, rather than helping the same former prisoner find multiple jobs). Partnerships are a key to success in this area. Intermediary agencies can provide critical supports that are beyond the expertise and capacity of most employers. Functioning as mediators, they are also available to assist the employer and employee in working through problems rather than terminating the relationship.

Employers can also play a role in a program's success by enhancing the attractiveness of entry-level jobs and fostering loyalty to the company. For example, employers can offer above poverty-level salaries and wages, training and opportunities for promotion, mentoring and personal attention during the first few months of employment, medical benefits and retirement plans, and flexible schedules. Further, there are a number of government-sponsored support mechanisms that could make the transition to work easier for employees. These include health insurance through Medicaid or state-sponsored plans, child care subsidies, special child support arrangements, transportation assistance, food stamps, and housing assistance. Government-sponsored benefits and protections are available to employers as well, and can encourage long-term relationships with employees.

While these incentives are certainly attractive, they are not likely, on their own, to create a movement of the magnitude necessary to employ the large number of former prisoners flowing into the nation's communities. Through solid partnerships among public and private entities, connections between in-custody and post-release job resources, and multiple transition points, employment outcomes of former prisoners will likely improve. Ultimately, finding ways to use the prison experience more effectively is critical to increasing the likelihood of finding and sustaining employment for the 630,000 individuals leaving the nation's prisons each year.

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