The Impact of a Comprehensive Re-entry Program on Employment and Recidivism in the United States

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Sector(s): Crime, Violence, and Conflict, Labor Markets, Political Economy and Governance

Location: Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States of America

Sample: 236 people who are incarcerated

Target group: Incarcerated people People with a criminal record

Outcome of interest: Arrests and convictions Earnings and income Employment

Intervention type: Re-entry programming

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The United States has a large prisoner population. Many people who are incarcerated who are released struggle to find jobs or are re-arrested and re-incarcerated. Researchers examined whether a program that provides people who are incarcerated with services both prior to and after their release could improve employment prospects and reduce recidivism. One year later, the program increased employment and reduced the likelihood of re-arrest. However, earnings among the people with a criminal conviction who were employed were low and left many below the poverty line.

Policy issue

The United States experiences high rates of recidivism among the 700,000 incarcerated individuals who are released annually from state and federal prisons. About two-thirds of people with a criminal conviction are re-arrested and more than half are re-incarcerated within three years of their release. Economic theory suggests that people who are incarcerated who are released are more likely to engage in criminal activities if they are not able to earn a living through legitimate work.

Since the 1970s, there have been a small number of randomized evaluations of programs designed to reduce recidivism by improving employment opportunities for people with a criminal conviction and supporting their reintegration into society after they are released. These post-release programs, however, have had little impact on long-term employment or the rates of recidivism. One limitation of post-release programs may be that they start too late to help people with a criminal conviction, who may become overwhelmed by the challenges they face related to employment, family relations, and substance abuse upon release.

Context of the evaluation

The Milwaukee Safe Streets Prisoner Release Initiative (PRI) provided pre- and post-release services to address the various challenges facing people who are incarcerated. The individuals participating in the study—all male—were on average 27–28 years old at the time of their release and had violent criminal histories or prior gang affiliations. The typical study participant had more than two prior felony convictions and was 19 years old at the time of his first felony conviction. Approximately 85 percent of study participants were black, and one-third did not have a high school diploma. The average participant read at a ninth grade level.

Funding for this initiative began in 2007 through a grant from the United States Department of Justice. The lead agencies were the Wisconsin Department of Corrections in collaboration with the United States Attorney's Office and local law enforcement.



Person in orange jumpsuit sits across from case manager in an office.

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Details of the intervention

To test the effectiveness of pre- and post-release services, researchers partnered with the PRI to offer services to 106 randomly-chosen individuals among a group of 236 deemed eligible. These 106 people comprised the treatment group, while the remaining 130 served as the control group. Prisoners were eligible if they were male, aged 35 or under, had a history of violence or gang involvement, and were scheduled to be released in Milwaukee with at least half a year of community supervision.

In the six months prior to release, individuals in the treatment group met with a social worker and were offered guaranteed access to a community employment program, vocational and soft-skills training, remedial education, the chance to participate in restorative justice circles, and treatment for drug and alcohol abuse. Individuals in the treatment group were also expected to participate in a twelve- to sixteen-week long cognitive therapy program to address behavioral patterns that could lead to re-

arrest.

In the thirty days before release, a coordinated-care team comprised of a social worker, job coach, and other officials worked with each person in the treatment group to address needs related to housing, transportation, and employment. After their release, individuals in the treatment group were eligible for substance-abuse treatment and work experience, training, and education vouchers through the community employment program. In addition, individuals in the treatment group were eligible for subsidized employment for six months. The participants in the treatment group received enhanced supervision from parole agents and also took part in follow-up meetings with their coordinated-care team.

Individuals in the control group were free to sign-up for the programs mentioned above, although they received no additional encouragement to do so and in some cases would have been placed on a waiting list. In practice, while some in the control group completed in-prison treatment programs, none participated in the community employment program. Once released, individuals in the control group were not subject to enhanced supervision.

Results and policy lessons

The PRI succeeded in increasing the likelihood that individuals had employment and in decreasing the likelihood of re-arrest in the year after release.

Among eligible people who were incarcerated who were released over the course of the evaluation, those in the treatment group were more likely to be employed in each of the four quarters following their release. Contrary to other recent employment-oriented re-entry experiments, the employment effect was sustained after the first six months, which suggests that the PRI had some success in transitioning people with a criminal conviction to unsubsidized employment. Among those in the treatment group, 81 percent reported earnings at some point during their first twelve months out of prison, compared to 59 percent in the control group.

Individuals in the treatment group had average earnings that were approximately $400 greater per quarter relative to the control group. Median annual earnings for those in the treatment group were $2,690 compared to $462 in the control group.

With respect to recidivism, individuals in the treatment group were less likely to be re-arrested in the first year. There was no discernable difference in the rate of re-incarceration between the treatment and control groups.

One of the main objectives of employment-focused programs such as the PRI is to reduce recidivism by increasing earnings through lawful employment and decreasing possible financial benefits associated with crime. While the PRI succeeded in increasing employment and decreasing re-arrests, most people who were released had earnings that put them below the poverty line. Other studies suggest that many people with a criminal conviction rely on support from family members and social service organizations to make ends meet.

Given that the PRI did not make most individuals self-sufficient, it seems unlikely that it substantially changed the economic costs and benefits of engaging in criminal activity. Instead, its effects on re-arrest rates may be due to some other mechanism. Since many different services were offered to members of the treatment group, additional investigation is needed to understand which services are most effective and why.

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