



---

National Institute of Justice

# **An Overview of Offender Reentry**

**U.S. Department of Justice**  
**Office of Justice Programs**  
**810 Seventh St. N.W.**  
**Washington, DC 20531**

**David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D.**

Director, National Institute of Justice

This and other publications and products of the National Institute of Justice can be found at:

**National Institute of Justice**

Strengthen Science • Advance Justice

[NIJ.ojp.gov](http://NIJ.ojp.gov)

**Office of Justice Programs**

Building Solutions • Supporting Communities • Advancing Justice

[OJP.gov](http://OJP.gov)

The National Institute of Justice is the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. NIJ's mission is to advance scientific research, development, and evaluation to enhance the administration of justice and public safety.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Office for Victims of Crime; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

Opinions or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

# An Overview of Offender Reentry

At the end of 2016, 1.5 million persons were under the jurisdiction of state or federal prisons or in county jails. A majority of these persons—close to 95 percent—will return to their community.<sup>1</sup> Currently, there are an additional 4.6 million persons under criminal justice supervision in the community.<sup>2</sup> Many will return to jail or prison within three years for a myriad of reasons. As these persons transition from life in jail or prison to life in the community, or what we commonly refer to as offender reentry, it's critical to understand the importance of this transition for offenders and their families, and its implications for public safety.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the offender reentry literature, offender outcomes, and the reentry initiatives that may work to improve public safety. NIJ investments will be noted and appropriate references provided.

## General

- A holistic approach to offender reentry—one that emphasizes the challenges faced by offenders as they return, and the impact of their return on families, victims, and communities—is critical to addressing public safety.
- Most criminal justice practitioners, agencies, and community- and faith-based providers do not have the resources to provide every adult leaving prison or jail with the services they need to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. The process of reentry is hindered by a lack of treatment services available to offenders before release from incarceration.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, for those programs offered in the corrections setting, most are not evaluated, thus making it difficult to observe “what works.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. Ann Carson, “Prisoners in 2016,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin* (January 2018), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Kaeble and Lauren Glaze, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2015,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin* (December 2016), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus15.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Lero Jonson and Francis T. Cullen, “Prisoner Reentry Programs,” *Crime & Justice* 44, no. 1 (2015): 517-575.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel P. Mears and Joshua C. Cochran, *Prisoner Reentry in the Era of Mass Incarceration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015.

## Federal Reentry Initiatives

- Federal reentry initiatives, for example the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) and the Second Chance Act (SCA), have been key to infusing resources in jurisdictions and communities to help address offender reentry for juveniles and adults.
- A multisite, multiyear, NIJ-supported quasi-experimental design evaluation of SVORI found that participation in SVORI programming increased receipt of services and programming for adult offenders.<sup>5</sup> At 24 months post-release, there were no significant differences in arrest and reincarceration rates for adult males or juveniles that participated in SVORI programming and those that did not. Female SVORI participants were significantly less likely to have been arrested at 24 months post-release; however, based on self-report data, they were equally likely to be reincarcerated during the follow-up period. At 56 months post-release, participation in SVORI programs was associated with longer times to arrest and fewer arrests for adult males and females. There was a similar finding for juvenile males at 22 months post-release.
- NIJ supported two independent randomized controlled trial evaluations of the SCA that found similar results. Participation in SCA programming increased access to and receipt of reentry services and programs for participants and improved partnerships with community agencies.<sup>6</sup>
- Results from both evaluations suggest that the provision of SCA programming did not significantly reduce recidivism.<sup>7</sup>

## Risk Assessment and Service Delivery

- The delivery of programming and services varies greatly across the criminal justice system. These processes are not standardized.
- Validated screening and assessment tools are essential in identifying an offender's risk and needs associated with future criminal behavior. Currently, the most dominant method for offender assessment and classification is the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model. Treatments based on the RNR model have been shown to significantly reduce recidivism.<sup>8</sup>
- The evidence-based practices framework emphasizes that criminal justice agencies and service providers should match offenders to services and programs based on their risk and needs factors.

<sup>5</sup> Pamela K. Lattimore and Christy A. Visher, "The Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI: Summary and Synthesis," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, April 2010, NCJ 230421, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230421.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald D'Amico, Christian Geckeler, and Hui Kim, "An Evaluation of Seven Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration Programs: Impact Findings at 18 Months," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, September 2017, NCJ 251139, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251139.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. *Note:* Final reports for both evaluations are forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> James Bonta and D.A. Andrews, "Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation, 2007-06," Public Safety Canada, 2007, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsk-nd-rspnsvty/rsk-nd-rspnsvty-eng.pdf>.

- Risk and needs assessments help inform the intensity, i.e., dosage and frequency, with which services are delivered.
- The type, level, and intensity of service will vary by an offender’s needs. It’s critical that risk of reoffending be appropriately identified. Research shows that exposing low-risk offenders to programming for high-risk offenders can be harmful.<sup>9</sup>
- The provision of intensive services and programs should be geared toward persons who are at high risk of reoffending.
- Some states, such as California, have experimented with sentencing alternatives to reduce prison populations. In their observational study using administrative data, Bird et al. (2017) found that offenders who were released from state to county control generally had slightly higher recidivism rates, but the findings varied greatly from county to county.<sup>10</sup>
- In a natural experiment of displaced returning offenders in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, Kirk (2009) found that offenders who did not return to their home county had lower rates of recidivism.<sup>11</sup>

## Family

- Family members provide the greatest tangible and emotional support to offenders as they reenter the community.<sup>12</sup>
- Former offenders who are married or have long-term relationships are less likely to recidivate or use drugs or alcohol compared to those in more casual relationships.

## Health

- Many offenders who return to their communities report having chronic or infectious diseases, depression, or other mental illnesses.
- Research suggests that existing reentry-related health programs are insufficient in their abilities to meet the physical and mental health needs of returning offenders.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Christopher T. Lowenkamp and Edward J. Latessa, “Understanding the Risk Principle: How and Why Correctional Interventions Can Harm Low-Risk Offenders,” *Topics in Community Corrections* (2004), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.629.7703&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Mia Bird, Ryken Grattet, and Viet Nguyen, “Realignment and Recidivism in California,” Public Policy Institute of California, 2017. *Note:* Revised final summary forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> David Kirk, “A Natural Experiment on Residential Change and Recidivism: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina,” *American Sociological Review* 74 (2009): 484-505.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca L. Naser and Christy A. Visher, “Family Members’ Experiences with Incarceration and Reentry,” *Western Criminology Review* 7, no. 2 (2006): 20-31.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore M. Hammitt, Cheryl Roberts, and Sofia Kennedy, “Health-Related Issues in Prisoner Reentry,” *Crime & Delinquency* 47, no. 3 (2001): 390-409.

## Employment

- Many people returning from prison have significant employment deficits. More than half have been previously fired from a job, and many depended on illegal income before incarceration.
- Employment can play a meaningful role in reducing recidivism. Employment serves as a prosocial routine activity and allows a returning person to contribute to and develop social ties with their community.<sup>14</sup>
- The integration of reentry and employment services is a challenge. For this integration to be successful, it requires a high level of coordination and collaboration between policymakers, practitioners, and service providers.
- To date, employment programs have not been shown to have a lasting impact on post-release employment success.

## In-Custody Education

- Many people returning from prison have significant educational deficits. About half lack a high school degree or equivalent. A meta-analysis conducted by RAND (2013) found that receiving education while incarcerated reduced the risk of recidivating after release by 43 percent.<sup>15</sup>
- Duwe and Clark (2014) found that program participants in a prison-based educational program who earned a high-school degree had better employment outcomes after release, but this did not translate to recidivism reductions. In contrast, earning a post-secondary degree through the program did result in both greater employment outcomes and recidivism reductions.<sup>16</sup>
- The provision of education during the incarceration experience matters.
- Prison education increases the employability of offenders when they reenter society.

## Housing

- Returning offenders face difficulties in finding stable housing due to individual challenges (e.g., mental health and substance use histories) and systematic barriers (e.g., housing restrictions).

<sup>14</sup>Mark T. Berg and Beth M. Huebner, "Reentry and the Ties That Bind: An Examination of Social Ties, Employment, and Recidivism," *Justice Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2011): 382-410.

<sup>15</sup>Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N.V. Miles, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education—A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*, RAND research report for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2013, [https://www.bja.gov/publications/rand\\_correctional-education-meta-analysis.pdf](https://www.bja.gov/publications/rand_correctional-education-meta-analysis.pdf).

<sup>16</sup>Grant Duwe and Valerie Clark, "The Effects of Prison-based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment," *The Prison Journal* 94, no. 4 (2014): 454-478.

- In their meta-analysis of community-based prisoner reentry programs, Wright et al. (2014) found that providing housing assistance had the greatest positive effect on returning individuals.<sup>17</sup>
- Department of Labor study of the Re-integration of Ex-Offenders (RExO) program: Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) evaluated the outcomes of participants in 24 RExO programs and found a significant but small impact on employment outcomes. SPR, which conducted the multi-site evaluation of SCA programs noted above, did not see a program benefit for other reentry outcomes, such as recidivism.<sup>18</sup>
- A greater understanding is needed about how housing serves as a platform for successful reentry.

## Substance Abuse

- NIJ-funded research employing a quasi-experimental design found that programs delivering alcohol abuse treatment in a correctional facility did reduce DWI recidivism.<sup>19</sup>
- Evaluations of the Hawaii Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) program that employed both quasi-experimental and randomized controlled trials found reductions in drug use and recidivism, in part through a random drug testing program. A multi-site randomized controlled trial replication of the HOPE program did not find similar recidivism reductions.<sup>20</sup>

## Effective and Promising Reentry Practices From CrimeSolutions.gov

- Therapeutic communities—a common form of long-term residential treatment for substance abuse disorders—are effective in reducing recidivism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin J. Wright, Sheldon X. Zhang, David Farabee, and Rick Braatz, “Prisoner Reentry Research From 2000 to 2010: Results of a Narrative Review,” *Criminal Justice Review* 39, no. 1 (2014): 37-57.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Wiegand, Jesse Sussell, Erin Valentine, and Brittany Henderson, *Evaluation of the Re-Integration of Ex-Offenders (RExO) Program: Two-Year Impact Report*, Final report to the U.S. Department of Labor, May 2015, [https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/ETAOP\\_2015-04.pdf](https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/ETAOP_2015-04.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> J. Mitchell Miller, Holly Ventura Miller, and Rob Tillyer, “Effect of Prison-Based Alcohol Treatment: A Multi-Site Process and Outcome Evaluation,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, April 2014, NCJ 246125, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/246125.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Hawken and Mark Kleiman, “Managing Drug Involved Probationers with Swift and Certain Sanctions: Evaluating Hawaii’s HOPE,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, December 2009, NCJ 229023, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/229023.pdf>; Pamela K. Lattimore, Doris Layton MacKenzie, Gary Zajac, Debbie Dawes, Elaine Arsenault, and Stephen Tueller, “Outcome Findings from the HOPE Demonstration Field Experiment: Is Swift, Certain and Fair an Effective Supervision Strategy?” *Crime and Public Policy* 15, no. 4 (2016): 1103-1141. Note: NIJ final report is forthcoming.

<sup>21</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse, “What Are Therapeutic Communities?” <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/therapeutic-communities/what-are-therapeutic-communities>.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of effective therapeutic community programs and practices include the *Better Futures Program* (randomized controlled trial) and *Incarceration-based Therapeutic Communities for Adults* (meta-analysis comprising random and quasi-experimental designs).

- Motivational interviewing—a tool for increasing motivation for change—significantly reduces an individual’s use of illicit substances.<sup>23</sup>
- Correctional work industries (CWI) provide work experiences for inmates while incarcerated. CWI are promising practices in reducing recidivism.<sup>24</sup>

## Application of Technology

- Technology is emerging as an important tool in offender reentry. It can be used by criminal justice supervision agencies to monitor offenders in the community.
- GPS, or the Global Positioning System, has been shown to be an effective monitoring tool for individuals who are on parole. NIJ supported two quasi-experimental design evaluations on the use of GPS as a monitoring tool for two groups of high-risk offenders: gang and sex offenders. For high-risk gang offenders, the technology was effective in identifying parole violations.<sup>25</sup> High-risk sex offenders who were monitored via GPS supervision were less likely to receive a parole violation.<sup>26</sup>
- An NIJ-funded study that employed both a quasi-experimental and randomized controlled trial found that for low-risk offenders, kiosk supervision was more effective in reducing new violations and recidivism than conventional supervision. Remote, tele-supervision was also shown to be just as effective in managing offenders as kiosk supervision.<sup>27</sup>
- A combination of appropriate service provision, community change, and the application of technology is key to promoting public safety among returning offenders.

<sup>23</sup> *Motivational Interviewing for Substance Abuse* (meta-analysis comprising 11 randomized control trials and one quasi-experimental design) is an example of an effective motivational interviewing practice.

<sup>24</sup> EMPLOY (Minnesota) [quasi-experimental design] is an example of a promising correctional work industries program.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Gies, Randy Gainey, Marcia I. Cohen, Eoin Healy, Martha Yeide, Alan Bekelman, and Amanda Bobnis, “Monitoring High-Risk Gang Offenders with GPS Technology: An Evaluation of the California Supervision Program,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, September 2013, NCJ 244164, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/244164.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Gies, Randy Gainey, Marcia I. Cohen, Eoin Healy, Dan Duplantier, Martha Yeide, Alan Bekelman, Amanda Bobnis, and Michael Hopps, “Monitoring High-Risk Sex Offenders With GPS Technology: An Evaluation of the California Supervision Program,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, April 2012, NCJ 238481, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238481.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Scott Crosse, Michele A. Harmon, Ronald E. Claus, Erin L. Bauer, Carol A. Hagen, and Eileen M. Ahlin, “Multi-Jurisdiction Research on Automated Reporting Systems: Kiosk Supervision,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, August 2016, NCJ 250173, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/250173.pdf>.