

# The Challenges of Reentry

By Pamela K. Lattimore



In 2003, the federal government funded all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands to develop and implement programs to facilitate the reentry of individuals convicted of “serious and violent offenses” who are returning to their communities following prison stays. The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) was a landmark undertaking not only because it entailed an investment of more than \$100 million in federal grant funds but also because of its focus on more serious (as opposed to less serious) inmates.

This second point is important because earlier federal programs often focused on providing services to those who were perceived to pose less of a threat to public safety (e.g., the Residential Substance Abuse Treatment programs for first-time drug offenders) or increasing the likelihood and terms of incarceration (e.g., the Violent Offender Incarceration/Truth in Sentencing program). Since the passage of SVORI, Congress has passed the Prisoner Reentry Initiative, which focuses on employment-based programming for inmates, and the Marriage and Incarceration Act, which

focuses on family programming for adult male inmates. The Second Chance Act was considered, but failed to pass, during the 109th Congress.

After 20-plus years of focusing on deterrence and incapacitation, SVORI and these other federal initiatives are important because they resurrect rehabilitation as a goal of correctional policy. Underscoring these initiatives is a resurgence of belief that there are programs, services and approaches that work in reforming the criminal proclivities of inmates. And, indeed, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that reform is possible, albeit with relatively modest success. In fact, most of the successful programs identified by the 2006 Aos study, titled *Evidence-Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not*, are associated with effect sizes of 10 percent to 20 percent, suggesting, for example, a 10 percent to 20 percent reduction in rearrest rates (see the work of Steve Aos and colleagues at [www.wsipp.wa.gov](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov)). However, even such modest reductions, if broadly realized, imply substantial crime reductions when applied to the millions of arrests each year.

Before looking further at current knowledge about what works with reentry, it is important to address two areas that are often acknowledged only implicitly, if at all. First, any discussion of inmate reentry should begin with an explicit acknowledgement and description of the factors that many individuals must overcome to be successful post-release. Consistent with this first point, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers must also acknowledge that developing, implementing, assessing, revising and improving reentry programs will require a long-term, sustained effort in contrast to the sporadic patchwork of initiatives and programs that have been implemented in the past.

## Recognizing and Respecting The Problem

The individuals incarcerated in U.S. juvenile and adult prisons have multiple deficiencies and problems likely to hinder their ability to successfully transition from institution to a crime-free life in the community. As detailed by many researchers, these deficiencies include little education, few job skills, little job experience likely to lead to good employment, substance and alcohol dependency, and other health problems, including mental health problems. In addition, their family and friends are often involved in crime and substance abuse, and they disproportionately return to neighborhoods with few economic opportunities and few, if any, positive role models. Finally, each must cope with a criminal record that can stand in the way of opportunities following release. While policy-makers, practitioners and researchers are well aware of these barriers to successful reentry, a failure to explicitly acknowledge the length of this list may lead to unrealistic expectations about the prospect of finding the magic bullet that will “cure” recidivism.

What is less often acknowledged and discussed is that these returning inmates have already been through (having failed or been failed by) the other social and public institutions and agencies designed to produce good citizens. In particular, many of those who end up incarcerated did poorly in the school systems that provide educational foundations for a successful adulthood. Many offenders have histories of abuse and neglect and may have been referred to, or in the custody of, family and social services. Adult inmates often have histories of juvenile confinement and adult probation that failed to provide the services, programming and support to reform and rehabilitate. And finally, many inmates have received alcohol and drug treatment outside the criminal justice system, but may remain addicted to drugs and alcohol. It is worth recognizing that those held by the juvenile and criminal justice systems have fallen through most of society’s safety nets by the time they end up behind bars. At this point, responsibility for helping these offenders become productive citizens is handed to underfunded agencies whose primary responsibility is public safety — not rehabilitation.

Judging by the ever-burgeoning prison population, which continued to grow as crime rates and arrest rates for index crimes declined — everyone has failed. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, within three years, about two-thirds of prison releases are arrested for new offenses, about one-third are reincarcerated for new offenses and about half are reincarcerated for either a new offense or parole violation.

## What Has Gone Wrong?

Current methods have not worked for various reasons:

***Fixing the problem on the cheap.*** BJS estimates that in 2001 state governments spent on average \$22,650 per inmate per year on operating costs. Although \$20,000 per year seems like a lot of money, it covers primarily security — which protects the public from the inmates, the correctional officers from the inmates and the inmates from each other — and not programming. (Some states spend much more, either because of higher costs in places like New York and California or because they are, in fact, providing programs and services.)

***Vacillating on how the issue is dealt with.*** As policy and politics reflect (or in some cases lead) public opinion, the goal of criminal justice policy swings from rehabilitation to deterrence to incapacitation. Thus, the war on crime and the war on drugs followed a judgment that rehabilitation was not attainable. These “wars” led to higher likelihoods and longer terms of incarceration for some offenses, as well as the imposition of numerous “collateral punishments” — for example, losing access to Pell grants, public housing, children — that further burden returning inmates.

More recently, there has been a renewed focus on rehabilitation, albeit perhaps without an accompanying decline in the efforts to be “tough on crime.” Thus, in fiscal year 2003, the federal government through the Department of Justice, provided more than \$100 million to state and local government agencies under SVORI to develop programs for returning inmates.

The SVORI programs were intended to identify and address all of an offender’s needs and provide the appropriate services and programming. SVORI funds were intended to supplement existing funding from correctional agencies, other appropriate agencies, and faith-based and community-based organizations. However, \$100 million represents less than \$200 for each of the more than 600,000 individuals released to parole each year. Further, the SVORI funds were spread over three years.

Since SVORI was recently rolled out, Congress did not reauthorize it, but instead chose to authorize the Prisoner Reentry Initiative. This initiative is managed by a different lead federal agency (the Department of Labor), excludes violent offenders and is focused largely on employment-related issues.

The latest funded program is the “Marriage and Incarceration” initiative, which is managed by the Department of Health and Human Services, not the Department of Labor or Justice. This \$30 million initiative is focused on strengthening marriage and families among male correctional populations.

Most recently, the 109th Congress debated but failed to pass the Second Chance Act. Although this legislation is likely to be revived by the 110th Congress, if it passes it is probable that the funding stream will head somewhere else (e.g., to different populations, different services).

The federal government is trying to provide leadership on this important issue. However, each time the funding stream changes, state agencies must develop new programs or retool existing programs to meet the objectives of the new initiative. Given the complexity of the issues and the

difficulties faced by returning inmates, the current approach to rehabilitation would be like the National Institutes of Health changing its approach to cancer treatment every two or three years.

Although this analogy may be a bit strong, it is clear that the challenge of addressing the many needs of inmates requires a concerted, sustained effort — one that is based on a continuous improvement model of development. Such a model should include technical assistance to state and local governments to help them identify appropriate evidence-based practices, monitor implementation and measure outcomes to ensure effectiveness. This monitoring will help agencies improve nascent programs, adjust them for their populations and modify their approaches if they are detrimental. Such an effort will require many years of sustained, applied work.

**Having unrealistic expectations.** Given the number and seriousness of the problems inmates face in reentering the community as productive citizens, the nature and level of the response to these problems, and the lack of knowledge about what to do to fix the problems, it is unrealistic to expect to find a “silver bullet.” But a silver bullet is what one looks for when new programs are sometimes implemented with minimal funding to the rigor of scientific evaluation, using stringent statistical standards to ensure that the new program works.

Poorly designed evaluations that imply programs are reducing recidivism by 50 percent or even 90 percent further complicate efforts of agencies and evaluators to find what works. These evaluations are usually based on comparing outcomes for program completers with those of program dropouts. These evaluations can illustrate only that people who fail at one thing are more likely to fail at another when compared with those who succeed, not whether the program was successful. In the meantime, however, many are left believing that substantial reductions in recidivism are to be expected.

## What Works?

Aos and his colleagues at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy have conducted one of the best reviews of the current evidence of the effectiveness of adult correctional programs. Their review of 291 rigorous evaluations of adult correctional programs found some approaches that appear to be working in terms of reducing recidivism and other programs that were less successful. According to Aos and his colleagues, this is what works:

- Adult drug courts;
- In-prison therapeutic communities;
- Cognitive-behavioral drug treatment in prison;
- Community-based drug treatment;
- Jail-based drug treatment;
- General and specific cognitive-behavioral programs in prison;
- Cognitive-behavioral treatment for sex offenders (in prison or in the community);
- Treatment-oriented, intensive community supervision programs;
- Correctional industry programs in prison;

- Basic adult education programs in prison;
- Employment training and job assistance in the community; and
- Vocational education programs in prison.

Approaches for which additional research and development are needed include:

- Case management in the community for drug offenders;
- Therapeutic communities for mentally ill offenders;
- Faith-based programs;
- Domestic violence courts;
- A variety of approaches for managing sex offenders in the community, including intensive supervision, mixed treatment, medical treatment and faith-based treatment;
- Regular parole supervision vs. no parole supervision;
- Day fines rather than traditional probation; and
- Work release.

Finally, Aos and his colleagues identified a number of programs that the evidence suggests are not effective. These include some popular programs, such as boot camps and electronic monitoring.

Thus, there is a good list of approaches that work or appear promising. But, what does “work” mean? Generally, it means reducing recidivism by 5 percent to 15 percent. Only cognitive-behavioral treatment in the community for sex offenders and treatment-oriented, intensive supervision appear to reduce recidivism by greater amounts (31 percent and 22 percent, respectively).

As a result, it is important that expectations are in line with what has been proved so far. Are these levels the best that can be done? Most likely these levels provide support to continue focusing on these types of programs in an effort to try to enhance and improve them.

A particular concern to many researchers is the issue of “dosage.” How much treatment is needed to be effective? Delivery of complete programs (e.g., drug counseling two or three times a week for three or six months) is difficult for offender populations for a variety of reasons. Within institutions, safety and operations drive activities. During lockdowns, programming stops; thus, there is no treatment, no education and so forth. Further, population movements between institutions traditionally are based on institutional capacity, security levels and offender security classifications — not on whether particular inmates are getting treatment or participating in programs. For offenders being supervised in the community, transportation, employment and family responsibilities interfere with access to regular treatment and programming.

Therefore, it is difficult to provide a set course of programming or treatment, making it difficult to determine whether that amount of treatment is sufficient to be effective. More attention to dosage (and to quality of services) is needed. This is particularly important for programs that have been shown to be effective or that appear promising.

## Preview of the Findings From The Multisite Evaluation of SVORI

Elsewhere in this magazine, Christy Visher and her colleagues present some implementation findings from the SVORI evaluation (see pages 30-35). These results focus on how the program directors have described their programs. The SVORI evaluation team has also begun to analyze interview data collected from more than 2,500 individuals. These data identify what the offenders reported needing and receiving in terms of services, programs and other assistance. The evaluation team also is beginning to examine interview data that indicate how SVORI participants are doing on a range of intermediate outcomes (measured at three, nine and 15 months following release) compared with those who did not participate in SVORI programming. Briefly, what has been found is:

SVORI programs have attempted to address the initiative's goals and provide a wide range of services. Evaluators have measured 28 categories of services prerelease and post-release, as well as two additional services (supervision and transportation) that could be provided post-release. Most programs claim to be providing a wide range of services across these 58 categories.

In addition, SVORI participants are getting more services and programs than those who are not participating in a SVORI program — a necessary but not sufficient condition for testing the effectiveness of SVORI. However, the levels are far less than 100 percent and some of the nonparticipants

are also getting the same or similar services (albeit at a lower rate), presenting a substantial evaluation challenge.

Finally, SVORI participants are doing better than average on a vast array of outcomes — if sometimes only moderately. A total of 116 outcomes were measured at three months. On average, SVORI participants were doing better on 98 of these 116 measures. Not all of these differences were statistically significant, but the odds of 98 of 116 outcomes being positive if SVORI were not having some type of effect approaches zero.

## Going Forward

The SVORI evaluation will provide considerable data and information on both the challenges and successes of reentry programming. This evaluation, like the initiative itself, is only the beginning. As the criminal justice community moves forward, it must always keep in mind the substantial number of problems that must be addressed and understand that these problems will yield only to a sustained, long-term effort to identify, implement and improve solutions.

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