



A Sneak Peek: Advice for State Policymakers on Designing Strategies That Improve Employment Outcomes and Increase Public Safety

STATES EVERYWHERE ARE STRUGGLING WITH budgets strained to their limits, growing prison populations, and crime. In response, many are engaging in a *Justice Reinvestment* approach that involves better managing corrections spending and other criminal justice processes, so that the resulting cost savings can be reinvested in strategies that increase public safety and draw on the expertise and experience of community and faith-based organizations. A reinvestment priority for many states has been to reduce unemployment among people under criminal justice supervision, who are particularly likely to commit crimes.

Research confirms that employment can help individuals with a criminal history stay out of prison and jail, lowering recidivism rates and victimizations.* The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, with support from the Department of Labor (DOL), is advancing strategies for high-risk populations that recognize the uniquely valuable role that community and faith-based organizations can play. These strategies help promote employment opportunities for people returning from prison or jail and others in neighborhoods that struggle with high crime, poverty, substance abuse, and other challenges.

This bulletin provides a preview of an upcoming blueprint, made possible through the support of DOL and private foundations, to use data-driven strategies to reduce criminal activity by helping connect at-risk individuals to short- and long-term employment. The release of this document will include information about how states may reinvest in community and faith-based organizations that deliver employment services to individuals who are likely to return to prison or jail.

Connecting Probationers and Parolees to the Workforce

There are four essential questions for legislators and state executives to consider as they determine how best to allocate scarce resources among people with criminal records to have the greatest impact on their becoming productive members of communities and families. Policymakers should collaborate with their department of corrections, probation and parole agencies, department of labor, workforce investment boards, private-sector

employers, and other key stakeholders to develop an employment reinvestment effort, including addressing the following questions:

- STEP 1:** Who should receive employment services supported by reinvestment efforts, and what are the desired outcomes?
- STEP 2:** What types of employment services do they need?
- STEP 3:** Do employment service providers have the requisite capacity and skills to meet this population's needs and the ability to coordinate with criminal justice agencies? What gaps exist?
- STEP 4:** How should employment services be organized and implemented?

STEP 1

Who should receive employment services supported by reinvestment efforts, and what are the desired outcomes?

- State officials should develop criteria to determine which individuals on probation or leaving prison or jail will receive services through the reinvestment initiative. Among the variables to consider are the individuals' risk of recidivating, their age and likelihood of maturing out of criminal activity, where the majority reside, and the time between release and when they can be engaged in employment activities.
- Policymakers should select several neighborhoods for reinvestment and apply the criteria to the universe of probationers and parolees in the selected area to estimate the size of the service population.
- After determining the size, scope, and geographic distribution of the group to be served, state officials should agree on specific criminal justice and employment outcomes that policymakers and others hope to achieve through the reinvestment initiatives. These measures should vary depending on local data collection systems and the ability to track relevant information. State policymakers should try to align selected outcome measures with similar definitions used in federal workforce investment grant programs.

*Bloom, D. (2007). *Transitional Jobs for Ex-Prisoners: Early Impacts from a Random Assignment Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Prisoner Reentry Program*, MDRC Working Paper; Visher, C., Debus, S., & Yahner, J. (2008). *Employment After Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Releasees in Three States*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

STEP 2

What types of employment services do they need?

- The types of services offered should address desired outcomes and multiple factors, including the population's education level, work experience, and employment needs. State officials should develop several different service packages that are tailored to meet the selected group's needs, as determined by available data.

Policymakers should consider a multifaceted approach that includes the use of job placement services, transitional employment, and mentoring and job coaching. These approaches should integrate case management, job retention, and skill development services.

- State officials should analyze the data on the selected population and the estimated service needs to determine the average cost of providing various service packages. With this information, state officials can determine a range of anticipated costs.

STEP 3

Do employment service providers have the requisite capacity and skills to meet this population's needs and the ability to coordinate with criminal justice agencies? What gaps exist?

- State policymakers should work with local officials to conduct an assessment of organizations, including smaller community and faith-based groups, that are accessible to the selected neighborhood residents and have the capacity to provide the required employment services. Through this analysis, policymakers can determine where gaps exist in capacity and where challenges to "scaling up" and improving the quality of the services may exist.

When deciding where to spend reinvestment dollars, state officials should consider whether organizations use or have the potential to employ best practices, including working well with other criminal justice agencies. Other considerations include whether organizations consolidate related services into a centralized location or, at minimum, link participants to other necessary services beyond simply providing referrals. Providers should have experience working with individuals with criminal records and fully understand the implications for employment (for example, how to explain a criminal record to a potential employer), incentives for employers (such as the Federal Bonding Program, Work Opportunity Tax Credit and local tax incentives, and first-source agreements), and

statutory occupational barriers. Sometimes investing in a seasoned intermediary might be the best investment.

Providers must recognize that some individuals are going to need multiple opportunities to engage with transitional employment or other services before they are prepared and ready to commit to permanent employment.

Policy Reforms. Policymakers should prioritize reforms that can improve the effectiveness of the reinvestment initiative. For example, state officials may choose to review and remove particular legal barriers to employment for some categories of people with criminal records. State leaders may also want to reexamine such issues as personal identification, federal benefits, transportation to jobs, and other issues that can destabilize the individual and his or her family.

Policymakers should consider any analyses of the local labor market to determine where opportunities exist for people with criminal records and encourage job growth in those sectors. They should also consider policies that would encourage the expansion of services in areas in which gaps in provision are identified.

STEP 4

How should employment services be organized and implemented?

- Policymakers should consult relevant state and local agencies and designate which will be responsible for administering the reinvestment initiative. Ideally, administrative structures should mirror financing structures. The designated agency should not have sole control. State officials should consider establishing or directing an existing oversight body, such as a reentry council, to approve any plans before expending funds. This kind of interagency structure can help facilitate collaboration among multiple agencies. The administering agencies should ensure that services are provided within corrections facilities and coordinated post-release.
- Agencies should also seek to develop formal mechanisms to ensure that the organizations that ultimately receive reinvestment funding achieve the outcomes identified for the target population. Such mechanisms could include setting clear outcome benchmarks, developing automated data collection systems, using performance-based contracting, and conducting independent evaluations through local universities or community colleges.

For more on these efforts, go to <http://justicereinvestment.org/>. To receive notice of the availability of the full employment blueprint, register for the free Justice Center's Reentry Policy Council news alerts at <http://reentrypolicy.org/newsletters>.

Views are those of the authors and do not represent the position of the U.S. Department of Labor or the Council of State Governments' members.

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