

## Ready4Work *In Brief*

*Update on Outcomes; Reentry May Be Critical for States, Cities*

By Chelsea Farley and Wendy S. McClanahan

As we publish this issue of *P/PV In Brief*—featuring updated findings from the Ready4Work prisoner reentry initiative—states and cities across the country face unprecedented prison (and prisoner reentry) crises. After two decades of “get tough on crime” policies, many prison systems are bursting at the seams, and state governments are buckling under the weight of ever-growing incarceration budgets. In 2000, 22 states and the federal prison system operated at 100 percent or more of their highest capacity.<sup>1</sup> In total, states spend more than \$40 billion per year on prisons—with some spending more on corrections than higher education.<sup>2</sup>

Recidivism is a major contributor to these problems. Nationally, about 650,000 ex-prisoners return to their communities each year, and two thirds of them are back behind bars within three years of their release.<sup>3</sup> This churning in and out of prison has devastating consequences for the families and communities directly affected (an estimated 2 million American children have a parent in jail or state or federal prison<sup>4</sup>). Returning prisoners are concentrated in the nation’s poorest neighborhoods, where their presence can disrupt already fragile social structures and where there are few supports and services to help them reintegrate.

With states facing serious questions about the financial—and social—costs of mass, repeat incarceration, many see reentry programs as a possible solution. But what program models hold the most promise for generating results? Do reentry programs really have the potential to reduce recidivism and ultimately ease the burden of overcrowded prisons and overstretched state budgets?

### California

In California, where there are more than 170,000 inmates in a system designed to house 100,000, federal courts recently threatened a take-over. On May 3, with a court-ordered deadline looming, Gov. Schwarzenegger and the state legislature agreed on a \$7.8 billion prison reform package focused mainly on building more prisons; the legislation also called for “reentry centers” and “inmate treatment and prison-to-employment plans,” but it’s unclear exactly how much funding will be allocated for these efforts or how they will take shape on the ground. Many critics argue that the legislation fails to address California’s long-term problems—including a 70-percent recidivism rate, among the highest in the nation. Still, the inclusion of reentry efforts is a significant step forward. The sheer magnitude of California’s crisis may provide the incentive to invest in reentry in a new and comprehensive way—and in so doing, it will be critical that California’s leaders build on lessons learned from Ready4Work and other previous reentry initiatives.

While much more research is needed to understand the true, long-term impact of prisoner reentry initiatives, outcomes from the recently completed Ready4Work demonstration give reason to be optimistic. These outcomes were extremely promising in terms of education, employment and program retention, with recidivism rates among Ready4Work participants 34 to 50 percent below the national average.<sup>5</sup>

### What Is Ready4Work?

Funded by the US Departments of Labor and Justice and the Annie E. Casey and Ford foundations, Ready4Work was a three-year national demonstration that provided reentry services to almost 5,000 returning prisoners in 17 sites around the country. This brief describes outcomes data from the 11 adult Ready4Work sites (six others served juveniles only<sup>6</sup>), updating findings published in September 2006 in the original *Ready4Work In Brief*.

Research has shown that ex-prisoners who obtain steady jobs and develop social bonds have much lower recidivism rates, but many find it difficult to obtain stable employment and establish positive relationships.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Ready4Work aimed to provide support in both arenas. Services consisted of employment-readiness training, job placement and intensive case management, including referrals for housing, health care, drug treatment and other programs. Ready4Work also incorporated a unique mentoring component, the theory being that mentors may help ease ex-prisoners' reentry by providing both emotional and practical support (helping returnees navigate everyday barriers, such as finding a place to live, getting a driver's license or figuring out how to commute to work).

Ready4Work services were delivered via partnerships among local faith, justice, business and social service organizations, each headed up by a lead agency. At six of the sites, the lead agencies were faith-based organizations; at three other sites, they were secular nonprofits. Operations in the remaining two cities were coordinated by a mayor's office and a for-profit entity.

## Who Enrolled in Ready4Work?

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Ready4Work targeted 18- to 34-year-old, nonviolent, non-sexual felony offenders—individuals with the highest risk of recidivism—and enrolled them within 90 days of their release from prison. Participants enrolled voluntarily, which is important in any consideration of program outcomes (see discussion on page 3). Ready4Work served a predominantly black male population. With an average age of 26, the initiative's participants were younger and more heavily minority than the overall population of ex-prisoners.

Half of all Ready4Work participants had been arrested five or more times. A majority had spent more than two years in prison, and almost 25 percent had spent five or more years behind bars.

Despite these extensive criminal histories, Ready4Work participants had some advantages when compared with the larger ex-prisoner population: They had slightly higher education rates, and more than half had held a full-time job for a year or longer before entering prison. At the same time, more than 50 percent of the participants reported earning half or more of their income from crime the year before they became incarcerated.

## What Are the Outcomes?

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### Mentoring

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Ready4Work's most innovative aspect may be its mentoring component: Few social programs have attempted to provide adults—much less ex-offenders—with mentors. At the outset, sites were given a choice between group and one-on-one mentoring.<sup>8</sup> Because so little research had focused on mentoring for adults, it was unclear which model might be most effective. In the end, many programs implemented, and many participants received, both types of mentoring.

Just over half of the Ready4Work participants met with a mentor. Of these, almost 60 percent participated in at least one month of one-on-one mentoring, while nearly three quarters reported attending at least one month of group mentoring. Nearly a third of enrollees participated in both types of mentoring.

Program planners had hoped that more enrollees would participate in the mentoring component of Ready4Work and that they would meet with their mentors more often than they typically did (the initiative had an original goal of matching 90 percent of participants with a mentor). Our results may simply reflect the reality that adults returning from prison face competing demands on their time. It is also worth noting that female Ready4Work participants were more likely than male participants to be mentored, perhaps indicating that some men resist forming a mentoring relationship. Finally, sites reported more success with the mentoring component as time went on, which may suggest a learning curve on the part of staff and volunteers about how to effectively implement this new program element.

In addition to tracking participation data, we conducted analyses of how mentoring was correlated with other outcomes. We found that mentoring was related to program retention and helping them find and keep jobs. More details on these correlations are provided below.<sup>9</sup>

### Program Retention

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Participants in Ready4Work remained engaged in the program for a significant period of time: a median of eight months. Only a small proportion left the program during the first few months, while 30 percent took

advantage of the full 12 months of services. Based on our conversations with corrections departments around the country, many reentry efforts—where they exist—may only provide services for a short post-release period (for example, 60 or 90 days). With the myriad of challenges facing ex-inmates, two to three months of post-incarceration reentry programming—without a connection to ongoing community-based interventions—may be too little to have any meaningful long-term impact on their lives. The Ready4Work program model provides longer-term support, a factor that state and city governments may want to consider as they seek to integrate lessons from this demonstration.

Strikingly, participants who received mentoring of any kind in a given month were 60 percent less likely to leave the program during the following month than participants who were not mentored, assuming equality on other participant characteristics.<sup>10</sup> On average, mentored participants remained in the program longer (10 months, versus 7 months for those who were not mentored). Because mentoring is voluntary, some of this observed link undoubtedly reflects participants' motivation. That is, participants who were more motivated were both more likely to be involved in mentoring and more likely to remain in the program. Nevertheless, the results are encouraging, because the longer participants remain engaged in a program, the more likely they are to benefit.

## Employment

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Ready4Work participants have had success both in finding jobs and remaining employed. Fifty-six percent of all participants held a job for at least one month while they remained in the program. More than 60 percent of those who found a job remained employed for three consecutive months and a third of them for six months or more. These accomplishments are impressive given the many barriers to employment these ex-prisoners face.

Mentoring may have played a role in helping these participants find jobs. Enrollees who took part in one-on-one mentoring were more than twice as likely to find jobs as participants who had never been mentored. Mentoring was also associated with helping enrollees remain employed. As noted above, these findings must be interpreted cautiously since mentoring and employment are both related to motivation and possibly other factors as well.

## Recidivism

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According to state incarceration records, recidivism rates among participants are considerably lower than those reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) for a nationally representative population of ex-offenders. Just 2.5 percent of Ready4Work participants returned to state prison with a new offense within six months of their release (compared with 5 percent nationally), and only 6.9 percent did so within one year (compared with 10.4 percent nationally).

We were also able to obtain BJS data on a group of ex-prisoners more similar to Ready4Work participants—18- to 34-year-old, African American, nonviolent felons—which provides a more relevant comparison point. Just 2.9 percent of African American nonviolent felons participating in Ready4Work returned to state prison with a new offense within six months, and 7.6 percent did so within one year. These rates are, respectively, 48 and 43 percent lower than those for the subsample of ex-offenders provided by BJS.

While Ready4Work's outcomes are very positive when compared with the BJS data, there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from such comparisons. The "motivation" factor previously mentioned is certainly germane to any discussion of recidivism. Furthermore, our study was not designed to determine if Ready4Work was the cause of any positive participant outcome. Because the model was so new, our research was oriented toward implementation questions, most fundamentally: Could a program that combines employment services, intensive case management and mentoring for newly released ex-prisoners be successfully implemented by faith- and community-based organizations? The answer to that question is yes. But more research, such as a random-assignment evaluation, would be needed to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Nonetheless, comparing Ready4Work's recidivism data to those from BJS does help us understand how these participants fit into the larger picture of recidivism among ex-prisoners—and the results are heartening.

## A Promising Model

Based on these early findings, Ready4Work shows real promise as a vehicle for helping people returning from prison forge connections in their communities. Sites enrolled ex-prisoners with numerous challenges and a high risk of recidivism, as indicated by their age, race and criminal backgrounds. They also managed to keep participants engaged in the program for a significant length of time—a median of eight months. What’s more, a majority of participants found jobs and many remained employed for three consecutive months or more. Ready4Work sites provided about half the participants with mentors, and those participants have done particularly well in finding and keeping jobs. Perhaps most striking, Ready4Work participants had recidivism rates well below the national average. These findings are certainly positive enough to warrant further research; for states and cities considering a new, more deliberate approach to prisoner reentry, Ready4Work may provide guidance about specific program strategies that are worth trying.

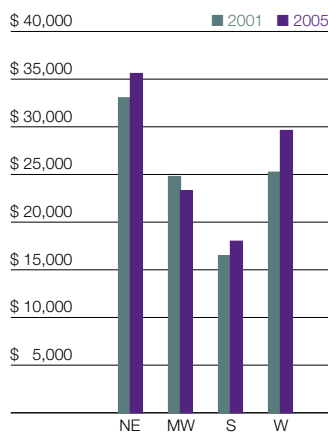
At an annual price tag of about \$4,500 per participant, programs like Ready4Work cost a fraction of the \$13,000 to \$45,000 it takes to keep someone in a prison for a year.<sup>11</sup> Promising models for prisoner reentry are available, and investing in them may yield huge dividends, not just for ex-prisoners themselves, but for states in crisis.

## Endnotes

- 1 Human Rights Watch, Retrieved May, 2007 from [http://hrw.org/prisons/united\\_states.html](http://hrw.org/prisons/united_states.html)
- 2 Greenblatt, Alan, “Felon Fallout: Overcrowding and Soaring Corrections Costs Are Pushing Prison Reform to the Top of States’ Policy Agendas.” *Governing Magazine*, March 2007.
- 3 Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994. Retrieved May 2007 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>
- 4 Family and Corrections Network, National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, *An Overview of Statistics*, Retrieved May 20, 2007.
- 5 The original *Ready4Work In Brief* provided recidivism data for 8 of the 11 adult Ready4Work sites; this updated version relies on data from all 11 sites.
- 6 Juvenile Ready4Work is being evaluated by researchers separately.
- 7 They often lack a high school education and have work histories characterized by sporadic employment and low wages. What’s more, laws in many states prohibit people with a prison record from obtaining vocational licenses in many sectors, and employers sometimes refuse to hire convicted felons because of safety and liability concerns.
- 8 In group mentoring, participants come together for group sessions with a mentor, rather than traditional one-on-one matches.
- 9 The mentoring component of Ready4Work will be explored more fully in a forthcoming P/PV report. There is a short preview of that report available at [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org) (McClanahan, 2007, *Mentoring Ex-Prisoners in the Ready4Work Reentry Initiative*).
- 10 Such as age, gender, education, etc.
- 11 The Public Safety Performance Project, Pew Charitable Trust, *Public Safety, Public Spending, Forecasting America’s Prison Population 2007-2011*, February 2007. This excellent resource is available at [www.pewcorrections.org](http://www.pewcorrections.org). Aggregate regional numbers (also from this report) are charted in the graph below.

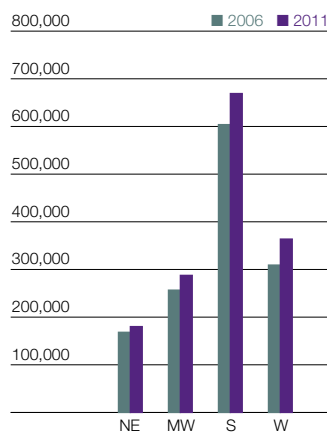
## Costs and Prison Populations Soar

Annual Incarceration Cost Per Inmate



Source: Data are from *Public Safety, Public Spending, Forecasting America’s Prison Population 2007-2011*, The Public Safety Performance Project, Pew Charitable Trust, February 2007. Graph by P/PV.

Current and Projected Prison Population



Source: Data are from *Public Safety, Public Spending, Forecasting America’s Prison Population 2007-2011*, The Public Safety Performance Project, Pew Charitable Trust, February 2007. Graph by P/PV.

### Regions:

#### NE: Northeast

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont.

#### MW: Midwest

Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin.

#### S: South

Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia.

#### W: West

Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

**Adult Ready4Work Sites and Lead Agencies:**

**Northeast**

**East Harlem, New York**  
Exodus Transitional  
Community (Faith-Based  
Nonprofit)

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**  
Search for Common Ground  
(Secular International  
Nonprofit)

**Washington, DC**  
East of the River Clergy  
Police Community  
Partnership  
(Faith-Based Nonprofit)

**Midwest**

**Chicago, Illinois**  
SAFER Foundation  
(Secular Nonprofit)

**Detroit, Michigan**  
America Works Detroit  
(For-Profit)

**Milwaukee, Wisconsin**  
Holy Cathedral/Word of  
Hope Ministries (Faith-  
Based Nonprofit)

**South**

**Houston, Texas**  
Wheeler Avenue Baptist  
Church 5C's  
(Faith-Based Nonprofit)

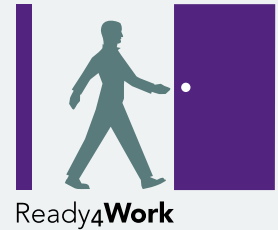
**Jacksonville, Florida**  
Operation New Hope  
(Faith-Based Community  
Development Corporation)

**Memphis, Tennessee**  
The City of Memphis,  
Second Chance Ex-Felon  
Program  
(City Program)

**West**

**Los Angeles, California**  
Eimago, Inc.  
(Secular Nonprofit)

**Oakland, California**  
Allen Temple Housing and  
Economic Development  
Corporation  
(Faith-Based Nonprofit)





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P/PV is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives.

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