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## Ready4Work *In Brief*

*Interim Outcomes Are In: Recidivism at Half the National Average*

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By Chelsea Farley and Sandra Hackman

In recent decades the number of people under the jurisdiction of federal and state correctional authorities has increased fivefold, surging from 96 to 486 per 100,000 US residents. More than 2.1 million Americans are now behind bars. And, as has been widely reported, this steep rise in incarceration rates has disproportionately affected minorities. The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that a staggering 12 percent of black men in their late twenties were in prison or jail in 2005. Incarceration rates for black males of all ages were five to seven times greater than those for white males of the same age.<sup>1</sup>

Because of skyrocketing incarceration rates, nearly 650,000 adults now return from custody to their communities each year. Many of these individuals find the transition back to society difficult, and recidivism rates are high. Indeed, an additional offense puts more than 25 percent of returnees back behind bars within three years; if probation and parole violations are included, the figure stands at more than 50 percent.

This churning in and out of prison comes at no small cost. Returning ex-prisoners go home to some of the nation's poorest neighborhoods, where there are few supports and services to help them reintegrate effectively and where their presence may threaten to disrupt already fragile households and social structures. While many families struggle with the most basic necessities, this country invests massive sums on incarceration. American taxpayers spend more than \$60 billion a year on prisons and jails.<sup>2</sup> It costs more than \$23,000 to incarcerate someone in a Federal Bureau of Prisons facility for one year and approximately \$3,500 per year for probation.<sup>3</sup>

Such economic and social considerations led P/PV and the US Department of Labor (DOL) to develop **Ready4Work: An Ex-Prisoner, Community and Faith Initiative** in 2003.<sup>4</sup> Funded by DOL and the Annie E. Casey and Ford foundations, Ready4Work was designed to address the needs of the growing ex-prisoner population and to test the capacity of community- and faith-based organizations to meet those needs. Three years into the initiative, Ready4Work programs are providing returnees with employment services, case management and mentoring in 11 adult sites around the country. As researchers continue to collect and analyze data from the programs, early outcomes are beginning to emerge, and thus far they are extremely promising: Participants are finding and keeping jobs at impressive rates, and they have significantly lower levels of recidivism than the national ex-prisoner population. This edition of *P/PV In Brief* reviews these and other interim outcomes from the Ready4Work initiative, relying on site reports, questionnaires completed by program participants and criminal records maintained by state agencies.

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### What Is Ready4Work?

Ready4Work is a three-year national demonstration being carried out in 11 cities around the country, where lead agencies have built partnerships among local faith, justice, business and social service organizations. Together the sites have enrolled 4,500 formerly incarcerated individuals, who can each receive services for up to one year.

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>5</sup>

Thus, Ready4Work aims to provide support in both arenas. Services consist of employment-readiness training, job placement and intensive case management, including referrals for housing, health care, drug treatment and other programs. Ready4Work also involves 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).

The lead agencies at six of the sites are faith-based organizations; at three other sites, they are secular nonprofits. Operations in the remaining two cities are headed up by a mayor's office and a for-profit entity. Across the sites, Ready4Work's cost per participant/per year of service is approximately \$4,500.

## Who Enrolls in Ready4Work?

Ready4Work targets 18- to 34-year-old, nonviolent, non-sexual-felony offenders—individuals with the highest risk of recidivism—and enrolls them within 90 days of their release from prison. All participants enroll voluntarily, which is important in any consideration of program outcomes. Ready4Work serves a predominantly black male population. With an average age of 26, the initiative's participants are younger and more heavily minority than the overall population of ex-prisoners.

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

Despite these extensive criminal histories, Ready4Work participants do have some advantages when compared with the larger ex-prisoner population: They have slightly higher education rates, and more than half 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?

### Mentoring

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>6</sup> Because so little research had focused on mentoring for adults, it was unclear which type of mentoring might be most effective. Program designers thought that one-to-one mentoring might foster deeper, more meaningful relationships and provide stronger support but worried that adults might find the idea of a personal mentor patronizing. One-to-one mentoring also requires intensive efforts to recruit large numbers of mentors. Group mentoring, in contrast, might hold more appeal for adults and requires fewer mentors, but Ready4Work's designers were concerned that the resulting relationships and support might not be as strong.

In the end, both approaches were tested, and in-depth analyses of sites' experiences with the two models are forthcoming. But early outcomes can tell us much about the overall promise of mentoring for this population. According to site reports from October 2003 through January 2006, about half of the Ready4Work participants met with a mentor for at least one month. Of these, half participated in at least one month of one-to-one mentoring, while nearly three quarters reported attending at least one month of group mentoring. Nearly one quarter 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 have (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 may play a role in retaining enrollees in the Ready4Work program, helping them find jobs and keeping them out of prison. More details on these correlations are provided below.

### Program Retention

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Participants in Ready4Work remain engaged in the program for a significant period of time: a median of eight months. Only a small proportion leave the program during the first few months, while just under 30 percent take advantage of the full 12 months of services.

Strikingly, participants who received mentoring of any kind in a given month were 70 percent *less* likely to leave the program during the following month than participants who were not mentored. Because mentoring is voluntary, some of this observed link undoubtedly reflects participants' motivation. That is, participants who are more motivated are 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. Almost 60 percent of all participants held a job for at least one month while they remained in the program. More than 40 percent—and more than 60 percent of enrollees who ever found a job—remained employed for at least three consecutive months during the program. And almost a third of all participants managed to remain employed for six consecutive months. These accomplishments are impressive given the many barriers these ex-prisoners face.

Mentoring—particularly one-to-one mentoring—may play a role in helping these participants find jobs. Enrollees who took part in one-to-one mentoring were more than twice as likely to find jobs as participants who had never been mentored. Mentoring is 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 incarceration records available for 8 of the 11 Ready4Work sites, 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 1.9 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 5 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 2.4 percent of African American felons participating in Ready4Work returned to state prison with a new offense within six months, and 6.3 percent did so within one year. These rates are 52 to 62 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 our 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 have enrolled ex-prisoners with numerous challenges and a high risk of recidivism, as indicated by their age, race and criminal backgrounds. Sites have also managed to keep participants engaged in the program.

What’s more, a majority of participants have found jobs and remained employed for at least three consecutive months. Ready4Work sites have provided about half the participants with mentors, and those participants have done particularly well in finding and keeping jobs.

The program also appears to play a role in helping participants stay out of prison, perhaps the defining marker of success for an initiative of this kind. Later analyses will examine whether mentoring for adults—a key innovation of Ready4Work—and employment are indeed linked to enrollees’ ability to remain out of prison. Especially if analyses reveal such connections, the initiative could prove to be an important model for states and cities hoping to ease the transition of ex-prisoners back to their communities. Given the costs of crime and incarceration throughout the country, Ready4Work’s promising early outcomes are good news indeed.

### Recidivism Among Ready4Work Participants,<sup>a</sup> Compared with the BJS Benchmark

	Number of People Who Reached This Postrelease Date <sup>b</sup>	Number Who Returned to Prison with a New Offense	Recidivism Rate	BJS Benchmark
<b>Overall Population</b>				
6 months	2,374	46	1.9%	5.0%
1 year	1,729	87	5.0%	10.4%
<b>18- to 34-year-old, African American, Nonviolent Felons</b>				
6 months	1,403	34	2.4%	5.6%
1 year	1,008	63	6.3%	13.3%

Source: Publicly available incarceration records. BJS = Bureau of Justice Statistics.

a Includes participants in Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Jacksonville, Memphis, Milwaukee, New York and Philadelphia.

b As of February 28, 2006.

## Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 5, 2006  
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pjim05.pdf>
- 2 Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, June 2006, "Confronting Confinement (A Report of the Commission's Findings and Recommendations)"  
[http://www.prisoncommission.org/pdfs/Confronting\\_Confinement.pdf](http://www.prisoncommission.org/pdfs/Confronting_Confinement.pdf)
- 3 Cost calculations were made by the Bureau of Prisons and by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts.  
<http://www.uscourts.gov/newsroom/prisoncost.html>
- 4 In early 2004, with funding from the US Department of Justice, P/PV launched Juvenile Ready4Work in seven cities around the country. Juvenile Ready4Work is being evaluated by researchers separately. This report refers specifically to findings from adult Ready4Work sites.
- 5 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 often refuse to hire convicted felons because of safety and liability concerns.
- 6 In group mentoring, participants come together for group sessions with a mentor.

To find out more about *Ready4Work*, please visit our website:  
[www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org).

## Adult Ready4Work Sites and Lead Agencies:

### East Coast

#### 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/Southwest

#### 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 Coast

#### Los Angeles, California

Eimago, Inc. (Secular Nonprofit)

#### Oakland, California

Allen Temple Housing and Economic Development Corporation  
(Faith-Based Nonprofit)



Ready4Work

# PPV *In Brief*

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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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