

Supporting Second Chances:

Employment Strategies for Reentry Programs

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P/PV

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV)

P/PV is a national nonprofit whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social programs, particularly those that aim to help young people from high-poverty communities successfully transition to adulthood. Working in close partnership with organizations and their leaders, P/PV aims to:

- Promote the broad adoption of appropriate evaluation methods;
- Advance knowledge in several specific areas in which we have longstanding experience: juvenile and criminal justice, youth development (particularly out-of-school time and mentoring) and labor market transitions for young people; and
- Enable practitioners and organizations to use their own data, as well as evidence in these fields, to develop and improve their programs.

Ultimately, we believe this work will lead to more programs that make a positive difference for youth in high-poverty communities.

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Introduction

More than 700,000 men, women and young adults return from our nation's prisons each year, and millions more are released from federal, state, city and county jails.¹ The vast majority of them return to the nation's poorest neighborhoods, where they face enormous obstacles to successfully reestablishing themselves. Half lack a high school diploma and steady work experience. Even those who finished high school may not have the basic reading and math skills to pass employment tests or enter occupational training.² Employers are frequently reluctant to hire convicted felons, and in many industries these individuals are barred from obtaining work licenses.³ For people with a criminal record, the road to an honest living is fraught with obstacles—and made even more difficult by the current economic climate. Many of these men and women will be rearrested and/or reincarcerated, at high cost to federal, state and local budgets. The human costs—to those who are churning in and out of jails and prisons and to their families and communities—are impossible to quantify.

In 2008, federal policymakers made the single largest investment to date toward reducing recidivism by passing the Second Chance Act. The legislation creates a dedicated funding stream for “prisoner reentry”—programs that help returnees prepare for employment, connect to affordable housing and access other supports that may ease the transition between incarceration and life on the outside.⁴ Since 2009, more than \$270 million in Second Chance Act funds have been awarded to a wide variety of institutions, including state and local governments, correctional departments and facilities, probation departments, courts and community-based organizations. Grants have been made in 10 general areas, including substantial funding for juvenile and adult mentoring, substance abuse programs and national demonstrations.

The Second Chance Act was signed into law with unusual bipartisan support. Policymakers hoped that by investing in reentry programs, they could begin to stem the country's skyrocketing incarceration costs—which now approach some \$65 billion⁵ a year. Despite its promise, the Second Chance Act has been criticized as needing a stronger focus on employment strategies and better use of evaluation.⁶ That being said, the act presents a vital opportunity to implement and test new programs aimed at reducing recidivism. And these programs should be informed by the best available evidence about what it takes to help formerly incarcerated individuals succeed—which is in no small part about helping them become gainfully employed.

Recidivism and Employment

More is known about the effects of imprisonment on employment than the effects of employment on recidivism. While research tells us that former inmates who hold jobs are less likely to recidivate,⁷ few evaluations of job training and placement programs serving the formerly incarcerated concretely point to specific interventions we know to be successful. Responding to this challenge, the Annie E. Casey Foundation asked Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to distill relevant lessons from research on employment programs for a range of disadvantaged populations and create a resource that will be useful for Second Chance grantees as they develop employment strategies.

Evaluations have been conducted on a broad range of employment programs, implemented by a variety of government agencies and nonprofit organizations, each with its own set of services and intended outcomes. Definitions of success—even of the most commonly used terms (“job placement,” for example)—vary greatly from program to program, making it difficult to understand and interpret results. Indeed, the workforce development field is a loose conglomeration of agencies, institutions, policies and programs that operate quite differently in each locale, with federal funding flowing through 47 programs across 9 departments,⁸ as well as state-, city-, county- and foundation-funded efforts. To learn more about the federal workforce system, click [here](#).

Research in the field is equally disparate. As is often the case with research on social programs, findings on employment initiatives are mixed, and it is frequently challenging to determine whether the results represent a true test of the approach being evaluated or instead simply reflect a particular organization's ability to implement that approach.

Furthermore, distinct models are often lumped together under a common name, such as “transitional jobs” or “sectoral employment,” when they in fact differ in critical ways. Local labor markets vary considerably, making comparisons from place to place difficult. And different levels of research rigor complicate matters even further. Some findings come from random control trials (RCT),⁹ commonly thought of as the gold standard in research; others compare outcomes for program participants to a similar (but not

identical) group. Still others document a program’s implementation and/or outcomes, without providing any point of comparison. (To learn more about the levels of rigor in research and how they may impact results, click [here](#).)

Looking across findings from so many different types of studies and attempting to discern overall themes and lessons is a challenging task. Additionally, since most of the research reviewed for this guide was conducted prior to the 2008–2009 recession, it is hard to know whether these strategies would fare similarly in today’s economy.

In this guide, however, we attempt to cut through these caveats and the ambiguity they create—to provide a summary that offers clear guidelines and suggestions for practitioners, based on the current body of research. To do this, in addition to a review of relevant literature, P/PV has tapped its own extensive experience with reentry and workforce development research and programming. The guide explores strategies in three major areas:

1. Services aimed at helping people find *immediate employment*;
2. Services that provide *paid job experiences* to participants; and
3. Services that help people gain *occupational skills*.

For each area of programming, we provide:

- An overview of the approach, including its history and a brief definition;
- A high-level summary of the most recent and rigorous research available about the approach;
- An example of the approach in action;
- Key “takeaways” for Second Chance Act grantees and other programs serving formerly incarcerated individuals—specifically, why you might pursue each approach and what to keep in mind if you do; and
- Where to go to learn more.

Since the ultimate success of an employment strategy may hinge on a range of additional supports, the guide also features a section called “Beyond Getting a Job,” which presents three approaches to help formerly incarcerated individuals get the most out of their paychecks and move into better jobs. The final section synthesizes lessons drawn from across the studies reviewed for the guide.

Finding Immediate Employment

At a Glance

Participants are placed in jobs as quickly as possible, with job quality and advancement serving as secondary goals. Immediate employment is prioritized over education and training.

Services aimed at helping people find a job quickly are often referred to as “rapid attachment” or “work first.” These services attempt to move people into immediate employment, which is important for former prisoners who are required to find a job as a part of their parole or need immediate income to support their basic needs. While there have been many random control trials on the use of rapid attachment with welfare recipients, no rigorous evaluations have been published about rapid attachment strategies for the formerly incarcerated.

History and Context

Rapid attachment strategies gained prominence with welfare reform and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This legislation eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (previously the backbone of the welfare system), instituted a five-year limit on cash assistance and pushed forward a strong effort to get welfare recipients quickly into jobs. This strategy became known as “work first” or “rapid attachment” and was characterized by requirements that most welfare recipients work in order to receive their cash benefit (work could include subsidized or unsubsidized employment, on-the-job training, community service and, in limited circumstances, vocational training or job search activities). These requirements were eased somewhat in recent versions of PRWORA. However, even after the law allowed for some flexibility to offer education and training services, many states and locales have continued to implement programs that emphasize getting a job quickly, rather than helping participants develop skills over time.

What the Programs Look Like

Although the goal of these programs is to place individuals immediately into jobs, in practice, approaches have differed and include:

- Mandatory work experience programs, which require that participants (typically welfare recipients) work in unpaid jobs, usually after or at the same time as participating in job search activities.
- Mandatory job search programs, which require that participants begin job search activities immediately, with the goal of finding quick employment.
- Mixed activity programs, which blend both job search and education services, with staff assessing participants' needs to determine which activity they will engage in first.

Finding Immediate Employment in

Action: The GAIN Program

Launched in 1995, the Gain Avenues of Independence (GAIN) program, operated by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, emphasized communicating the benefits of work; cautioning participants about the limits, restrictions and sanctions of welfare reform; and supporting them to find jobs matched to their interests and abilities. During an intense six-hour orientation, staff introduced the message, "work is in—welfare is out," and reinforced it during one-on-one sessions and job clubs (which involved supervised job searches, résumé writing, completing job applications and job interview practice). Throughout the process, staff emphasized two themes: "employment can build self-esteem" and "work experience is the best training."

To learn more about the research on rapid attachment strategies, click [here](#).

What the Research Says

To date, all of the rigorous evaluations of rapid attachment approaches have focused on programs serving welfare recipients. These programs serve primarily women, while the formerly incarcerated population is overwhelmingly male. However, the two groups share some important characteristics: Welfare recipients, like former prisoners, are often mandated to find immediate employment, and they face similar barriers to employment (such as limited or no work histories and low basic skills). Of course, those who have been incarcerated have an obvious disadvantage, relative to most welfare recipients, simply by virtue of their criminal record.

Findings from rigorous studies of rapid attachment strategies for welfare recipients indicate that program participants are more likely to find employment and that they earn more money (mostly as a result of working more) than members of the studies' control groups.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, a sole focus on immediate employment leads to short-term increases in earnings, with the strongest effects for people who are better educated and have more work experience—that is, those who are more "work ready" than their peers. Some studies also suggest that participants who receive additional support or education services fare better.

This finding is echoed in P/PV's more recent evaluation of the Ready4Work reentry initiative, which found (preliminary) evidence that mentoring services, in combination with other supports, may help ex-prisoners find and retain employment.¹¹

Why Pursue This Strategy

- People returning from prison need money (for rent, food, clothes, child support, etc.). Furthermore, many are mandated to find a job as a condition of their release. Programs that help participants find immediate employment address these very real needs.
- Given that people are most likely to be arrested in the months shortly after release, finding immediate work may play a vital role, as it provides a paycheck, a positive routine and some work experience before negative patterns can reemerge.¹²
- Setting up job clubs, résumé writing services and interviewing workshops—key elements of a strategy that focuses on immediate employment—is relatively simple to implement, compared with the more complicated approaches that we outline next.

What to Bear in Mind

- These services can help people to find immediate employment, but the jobs tend to be of low quality and rarely lift participants out of poverty in the long term.¹³
- Research suggests that models that build in education and training and other supports, together with job search services, have the largest impacts on earnings.
- The evidence for this approach comes mostly from services geared toward women. Jobs that welfare recipients tend to secure are frequently in sectors and occupations that may exclude people with a criminal record.
- Research on these strategies was conducted prior to the recent recession. Historically, people with a criminal record have often found work in two sectors that were hit particularly hard in the downturn—manufacturing and construction. In addition, regardless of the sector, formerly incarcerated people are now typically competing for jobs with many people who were recently laid off. This more competitive labor market may make rapid attachment strategies less successful.
- Some reentry programs have experimented with offering rapid attachment coupled with more comprehensive support (e.g., intensive case management or mentoring). These programs have produced some promising early findings; more research will further illuminate their potential for helping formerly incarcerated people successfully reintegrate into their communities.¹⁴

Resources

The National HIRE Network

www.hirenetwork.org

Established by the Legal Action Center, the National HIRE Network provides information, resources and training for agencies working to improve the employment prospects of people with criminal records.

Job Development Essentials

http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/144_publication.pdf

This guide for job developers, published by P/PV, provides practical advice about helping low-income people find and keep jobs, with an emphasis on effectively serving both job seekers and employers.

Going to Work with a Criminal Record

www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/238_publication.pdf

Also published by P/PV, this guide details lessons from the Fathers at Work initiative and provides important insights about serving job seekers with criminal records.

Providing Paid Work Experience

At a Glance

Participants are placed in paid, subsidized, temporary jobs and receive case management and coaching services. The primary goal is to provide immediate income and work experience.

Transitional jobs programs provide job seekers with immediate, but time-limited, wage-paying jobs that combine real work and supportive services to transition participants rapidly into the labor market. Program staff work with clients to address on-the-job performance and to troubleshoot any issues that might prevent them from succeeding (e.g., childcare, transportation). Unlike the rapid attachment model, transitional jobs programs focus on securing *temporary, subsidized* employment for their participants who may have difficulty attaching quickly to the labor market. Transitional jobs programs often serve as the “employer of record” and thus may open doors to businesses/organizations that might be reluctant to directly hire someone who has been incarcerated.

History and Context

Although paid work experience has been used for decades by many organizations (such as Goodwill), the transitional jobs movement grew in the 1990s as federal welfare policy shifted, allowing states to include subsidized employment models. Transitional jobs strategies have been used for diverse populations, including long-term welfare recipients, former prisoners, disabled workers and youth who are neither working nor in school. Today, according to the National Transitional Jobs Network, more than 30 states and localities have implemented transitional jobs programs.

As with rapid attachment, transitional jobs are seen as potentially beneficial for formerly incarcerated individuals, because they provide an immediate source of legitimate income and can curb the lure of street life that former inmates often face soon after release. These programs give participants a recent employment history and help them forge relationships with people who can recommend them—both of which are critical for future job searches.

What the Programs Look Like

While there are a variety of transitional jobs models, three of the most common are:

- Individual placement programs, in which program staff place participants in jobs, typically at nonprofit organizations or local government agencies, with wages that are subsidized partly or entirely by the program.¹⁵
- Work crew, in which the program groups participants into crews to provide services to other organizations or in the community. The program serves as the “employer of record” and may provide supervision at the work site.
- Social enterprise, in which the program operates a revenue-generating business, selling products or services and employing participants in the business.

Providing Paid Work Experience *in Action: Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)*

The transitional work model implemented by CEO and recently evaluated by MDRC emphasized helping former prisoners develop productive work habits and skills; daily pay for good job performance; addressing challenges arising at work; and providing ongoing support and incentives to encourage participants to maintain steady employment. The program began with four days of work readiness training, which was followed by subsidized, temporary employment in maintenance crews at sites around New York City. Participants were closely supervised by program staff, who focused on basic skills, such as cooperating with supervisors and coworkers, being on time and working productively and responsibly. Once participants had performed successfully in a work crew, a job developer helped them find permanent employment matched to their interests and skills and appropriate in light of their criminal histories. For more information about CEO’s model, visit www.ceoworks.org.

For additional examples of programs that provide paid work experience, go to:

- [Rubicon Programs, Social Enterprise](#)
- [Alternative Staffing Organizations](#)

What the Research Says

Over the past few years, there have been three notable studies measuring the impact of transitional jobs—one on welfare recipients and two on people returning from incarceration. All showed the immediate earnings gains to be expected from immediate paid employment. These earnings gains were short lived, however, diminishing after the first year.¹⁶

One of the programs that focused on former prisoners, the Center for Employment Opportunities’ transitional jobs program (see textbox), also produced a sizable impact on recidivism. Participants were significantly less likely to be convicted of a crime or to be incarcerated than were members of the control group. Participants who entered the program quickly after release had significantly lower rates of recidivism, including arrests, convictions and returns to incarceration. These reductions persisted for at least three years. Another study of four transitional jobs programs that focused on former prisoners found no effect on recidivism, but two of the four organizations studied were

focusing for the first time on former prisoners, and in three of the four sites, control group members received job search services from another organization that was more experienced in working with people returning from prison than study sites were. In our judgment, the CEO study offers persuasive evidence that transitional jobs programs implemented by an experienced organization, with deep knowledge of the criminal justice system, can indeed reduce recidivism.

Why Pursue This Strategy

- Transitional jobs give participants an immediate earnings boost, work experience and a paycheck. CEO's program, in fact, pays participants on a daily basis, which provides an incentive to return to the worksite each day, and may indeed be part of the model's success.
- Some people returning from prison have little or no work experience. Given the challenging economy and employers' reluctance to hire formerly incarcerated people, transitional jobs may be the only viable option for developing that experience—and as such may serve as a crucial first step toward longer-term employment.

What to Bear in Mind

- All the studies on transitional jobs suggest that people with fewer skills and less education and work experience benefit more. It makes sense to offer transitional jobs services specifically to this “higher-need” population. (Formerly incarcerated people who have higher skills may be better served by other program approaches.)
- Cash incentives may have an important role to play in transitional jobs programs. This can include incentives to stay in the program (like CEO's daily paycheck) or incentives to find and keep unsubsidized jobs following the transitional job (some programs offer cash bonuses for those who do).
- Transitional jobs last from a few weeks to a few months—a valuable experience, but one that, by itself, may not be enough to make a sustained difference for someone returning from incarceration. Providing strong job development services at the end of the transitional job experience may increase the odds that formerly incarcerated participants find unsubsidized employment and are able to maintain their foothold in the labor market.
- Transitional jobs programs are more costly than the rapid attachment model because they pay or subsidize participants' wages and often serve as the employer of record.

Resources

National Transitional Jobs Network

www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/

The National Transitional Jobs Network provides a clearinghouse of resources, tools, policy updates and other information about and for transitional jobs programs.

Alternative Staffing Alliance

altstaffing.org/

Alternative Staffing Organizations (ASOs) may offer many of the same advantages as transitional jobs programs. ASOs are similar to traditional temporary staffing agencies, except that they focus not only on serving business customers, but also on helping disadvantaged people participate and succeed in the labor market. The Alternative Staffing Alliance provides helpful guides, case studies, best practices, research, publications and staffing industry data—as well as a member directory at altstaffing.org/directory.html, which can help you find an alternative staffing program in your area.

Providing Occupational Training

At a Glance

These programs aim to understand the needs of local employers, so they can provide relevant and timely training and help workers gain skills that lead to higher-quality jobs.

The provision of occupation-specific training is often referred to as “sectoral” employment, because these programs meet the needs of specific industry sectors. These are the most complex and resource-intensive of the models described in this guide. They require significant expertise and a large amount of staff time to build deep relationships with local employers. Programs must be able to quickly adapt their training curricula as local industry needs evolve. Sectoral training programs take weeks or even months to complete, meaning job seekers often have to forgo immediate income—in hopes that the skills they gain may lead to higher wages and steadier employment in the long term.

History and Context

During the mid-1980s, several nonprofit organizations pioneered the use of sectoral approaches as they sought to improve the prospects of low-income workers by understanding and responding to the needs of local businesses. The innovation was a commonsense one—to provide training that is closely linked to local industry needs and to ensure that workers end up with valuable skills and connections to real jobs. Over several decades, experience and research suggesting that sectoral programs produce important benefits for workers and businesses have accumulated. The approach has spread rapidly in recent years.

What the Programs Look Like

There are a growing number of “sector” programs nationwide—operated or sponsored by community colleges, Workforce Investment Boards, state and local agencies, community-based organizations, labor-management partnerships and employer associations. According to the National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP), half of the states are employing sector strategies or actively investigating how they can do so.¹⁷ At

the federal level, legislation that would support sector-based partnerships is currently pending.¹⁸

The best of these programs provide essential human resource services to employers—in many cases to small and medium businesses—that help them remain competitive in a challenging economy. They provide not only training that is closely tied to employers’ needs, but also an ongoing partnership, including support to help workers succeed once they’re on the job. By definition, sectoral programs look different from place to place, as they respond to the realities of their local labor market. Organizations implementing sectoral programs also vary widely. Despite this diversity, some general “best practices” for sector programs are beginning to emerge.

Providing Occupational Training in Action: The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP)

WRTP is an association of employers and unions that develop training programs for specific job opportunities in the Milwaukee area. The training generally lasts between two and eight weeks, which is relatively brief for a sector-based training program. Staff helps participants develop “essential skills” related to timeliness, attendance and understanding the work culture of the participating industry sectors—construction, manufacturing and healthcare. Participants also receive case management (to address such issues as childcare or transportation) and job placement and retention services (to help them maintain steady employment).

What the Research Says

There is growing evidence that sector-based training can have a positive impact on individuals with multiple barriers to employment. The most rigorous study to date is P/PV’s random assignment evaluation of three mature, nonprofit-led sectoral programs.¹⁹ Participants in these programs fared much better than members of the control group, including higher earnings and better jobs (as measured by hourly wages and access to benefits). While none of these programs specifically targeted former prisoners, two served a substantial number of formerly incarcerated participants, with encouraging results.

One program, Per Scholas, provided training in refurbishing “end-of-life” computers. About 9 percent of the participants were formerly incarcerated, and this group worked more and had considerably higher earnings—nearly \$14,000 more in the second year of the study—than formerly incarcerated controls. A second program, Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (see textbox), which focused on the construction sector, served a much larger proportion of formerly incarcerated individuals (38 percent of participants). After two years, formerly incarcerated participants worked more and earned more (in excess of \$8,000), compared with their control group counterparts.

The study produced strong evidence that mature, nonprofit-led training programs can increase employment and earnings for people who have been incarcerated, but it did not measure the programs’ impact on recidivism. More research is needed in this area.

Why Pursue This Strategy

- Unlike strategies that focus on immediate employment, occupational skills training has been proven to help formerly incarcerated people get *better and higher-wage jobs*. This may be critical for their long-term success.
- Sector strategies typically work best for people with a GED or high school diploma and at least sixth grade reading and math skills—and many returning from prison have these skills. But programs must carefully *recruit* and *screen* participants to make sure they are a good fit for the training.
- More and more jobs in the US labor market require some education beyond a high school diploma.²⁰ Correctional populations are at a significant disadvantage in this regard: According to Bureau of Justice Statistics data published in 2003, an estimated 60 percent of state prison inmates, 73 percent of federal inmates and 53 percent of inmates in local jails had completed high school or its equivalent, but the vast majority had no postsecondary education.²¹ Occupational training programs can help formerly incarcerated people gain valuable technical skills and, in some cases, industry-recognized certifications.

What to Bear in Mind

- Occupational training programs can take many weeks—even months—to complete. Participants generally go without income during that time, which may be challenging for someone returning from incarceration, due to the typically urgent need for housing, income, and work. Programs should help participants access supports that increase their odds of completing training.
- The research on sector programs emphasizes the importance of flexibility: Successful programs must maintain a constant dialogue with industry leaders and simultaneously adjust training curricula and entrance requirements to meet shifting industry demands. This is challenging and time-consuming work that is frequently not fully funded by public sector contracts. Additional support from private philanthropy may be necessary to implement an effective sector-based training program.
- Selecting the right sector or occupation is critical when considering training for people who have been incarcerated. Sector programs that serve former inmates must be attuned to any laws or regulations—particularly occupational and licensing barriers—that affect what jobs are available to people with criminal records.

- In addition to identifying the right sectors and occupations, programs must also consciously and deliberately *forge connections* within those sectors. Helping participants build relevant skills is vital, but most people returning from incarceration have limited employment networks. Strong training programs also serve a “brokering” function to get trainees into appropriate jobs.
- For many organizations, partnership might be the best way to deliver sector-focused training. If your program is unable to devote the resources required for this high-intensity approach, consider partnering with a local sectoral employment program that already has this capacity. To find a sectoral program in your area, visit the National Network of Sector Partners’ [website here](#).

Resources

National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP)

www.insightcced.org/communities/nnspp.html

A nationwide membership organization dedicated to promoting and increasing support for sector initiatives, NNSP offers a resource library as well as a detailed interactive map of sector programs and their supporters around the country.

State Sector Strategies

www.sectorstrategies.org/

This website is part of an ongoing multistate project focused on accelerating the adoption of sector strategies. It offers a library of sector resources and a toolkit for states interested in implementing a sectoral approach.

Workforce Strategies Initiative (WSI)

www.aspenwsi.org/

The Aspen Institute’s WSI has studied sectoral initiatives for more than a decade and has developed a variety of policy briefs, case studies and research reports.

Skills2Compete

www.workforcealliance.org/the-issues/skills2compete.html

The National Skills Coalition launched this campaign in 2007 to make the case for a “21st-century skills guarantee” that could increase the number of workers with middle-skill credentials. The site features advocacy resources and links to state-specific campaign materials.

Beyond Getting a Job

Finding a job is essential, but recently released inmates may need additional support to get the most out of their paychecks and move into better jobs. Whatever employment strategy your organization uses—whether focusing on immediate employment, paid work experience or occupational training—the following approaches may increase participants’ economic stability and help them progress toward a viable career.

1. Link Participants to Income Supports.

Spurred by increasing numbers of people who work full time but don’t earn enough to live on, many employment programs have begun to help low-wage workers access earnings supplements. These “income supports”—including Earned Income Tax Credits, childcare subsidies, health insurance and food stamps—can help formerly incarcerated people close the gap between what they make and what they need to cover their basic expenses.

There are several good resources available for organizations that seek to connect their participants with the income supports to which they are entitled. Overall, it is important to bear in mind that accessing supports can be time consuming and confusing. Knowledgeable staff who have good tools and experience with these systems will increase the odds of success.

While income supports typically are not tailored to people returning from incarceration, many of them can be adapted to help meet their needs. For more information about income supports, see:

- [Single Stop USA](#), which provides information about public benefits, tax credits and other essential services.
- www.benefits.gov

2. Work with Child Support.

More than half of the inmates in state prison and a full 63 percent of those in federal prison report having children.²² During the time they are incarcerated, many accumulate “arrears”—or back child-support payments—and some come out to face child support orders based on much higher wages than they’re earning after release. People who return from incarceration and fail to make payments as ordered can face serious sanctions, including having their wages garnished, bank accounts seized, tax refunds withheld and driver’s licenses revoked (specific practices vary by state). Child support agencies may be willing to work with recently released individuals to review the amount of their child support orders in relation to their current earnings, and might be able to help them find manageable ways to pay down their child support debt. And programs can provide a valuable service by helping participants successfully navigate the child support system.

P/PV’s Fathers at Work demonstration—which was designed to help young noncustodial fathers increase their employment and earnings, become more involved in their children’s lives and increase payment of child support—provides an illustrative example. The programs in the initiative served a large number of men with criminal records (76 percent had criminal records, and 49 percent had been released from jail or prison within the past 12 months). Each of the programs developed an explicit partnership with its local child support enforcement agency,²³ allowing it to expedite the typical bureaucratic process of modifying child support orders and eliminating a significant disincentive faced by participants pursuing work in the formal economy (i.e., fears that legitimate employment might “spring the trap” of child support enforcement sanctions). The demonstration produced promising results: Participants in Fathers at Work programs were more likely to be employed, stay employed and earn more than a comparison group of similar young fathers.

A few states, such as Maryland, New York and New Jersey, have undertaken efforts to work upfront (upon incarceration) to develop reentry plans that address child support and other debts.²⁴ It makes sense to look into specific programs that may be available in your state to help returning inmates manage their financial obligations.

For tips about partnering with child support agencies, see:

- *Navigating the Child Support System: Lessons from the Fathers at Work Initiative*, published by P/PV in 2009.

3. Link Participants to Continuing Education and Advancement Options.

Formerly incarcerated individuals will ultimately need more permanent, higher-skilled and better-paying jobs to support themselves and their families. An advancement strategy that provides training and connections to postsecondary educational opportunities is critical for helping formerly incarcerated people move to more sustainable, gainful employment.

While most of the research relating to corrections and education has focused on the effects of in-prison educational interventions,²⁵ a number of programs have been working to help formerly incarcerated individuals navigate entrance requirements for college, transfer credits from in-prison programs and access financial aid. Just as there is evidence about the value of an “intermediary” to help explain and navigate the child support system, programs can play a similar role around postsecondary education—with the goal of helping formerly incarcerated people enter and succeed in college—and thus be better prepared for the labor market over the long term.

While not focused on people with a criminal record, the recent Courses to Employment demonstration illuminated some promising strategies for nonprofits collaborating with community colleges to support low-income adults while they work and learn. For more information, see:

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www.aspenwsi.org/research-resources/sector-and-community-colleges/

Reflections and Key Takeaways

There are rich learnings for Second Chance grantees from the experience of the workforce development field over the past decade. Extensive research exists on welfare reform efforts across the country; a new body of evidence has been developed on transitional jobs; and emerging research supports the effectiveness of well-implemented sectoral training programs. While there is still much to be learned, this guide attempts to provide a common sense starting point for Second Chance grantees and other practitioners who want to deploy “evidence-based” approaches in their work with formerly incarcerated individuals.

We know that strategies that help people get immediate employment can boost earnings and are more effective for those who have their GED or high school diploma. We know that transitional jobs can occasion a similar boost initially and, in at least one study, led to reductions in recidivism. And we know that mature nonprofit-led sector programs can help many people, including the formerly incarcerated, get jobs that pay higher wages and have better access to benefits. But is there more to be learned by looking *across* the different studies examined for this guide? Indeed, taken together, they suggest a number of useful insights and lessons:

1. Experience Counts—at the Organizational and Staff Level.

The experience levels of the implementing organization and its staff are cited frequently in research reports as a key factor in the success of employment programs. Experience with the approach and a track record working with formerly incarcerated people and the systems that affect them are both important. For example, in one of the studies reviewed for this guide, a transitional jobs program’s effectiveness may have been undermined by its staff’s relative inexperience with formerly incarcerated individuals.

Significant experience is needed for effective sector-based training programs, which require a deep understanding of industry needs and the ability to respond as those needs change. The relationships and skills required to do this well take time to develop. In selecting organizations for P/PV's impact study of sector programs, which produced such encouraging results, we focused on the depth of the organizations' experience with local employers, rather than on the specific length or type of services participants received.

In contemplating a workforce strategy, it is important to understand your organization's strengths and consider if you want to build the internal capacity and devote the time needed to develop an employment program—or partner with organizations that already have that experience. If such programs exist in your area and it is possible to structure partnerships that meet your clients' needs, this may well be the most effective approach.

2. Employer Connections Are Also Crucial.

Whether it's the Rolodex of a trained job developer focused on immediate employment, or the relationships inherent in delivering a training program that meets the needs of local manufacturers, real, live connections to local employers are essential for workforce programs to be successful.

In recent years, the “dual customer” approach has gained prominence in workforce development, putting equal emphasis on the needs of employers and job seekers. By understanding employers' needs, providing relevant certifications and experience (through internships, for example), and checking in (typically at the worksite) regularly about workers' performance, program staff can change the conversation from “Please hire this formerly incarcerated person” to “We have qualified workers who can meet your business needs.” Program staff can also play a useful role by connecting employers with incentives to hire former prisoners, such as tax credits and bonding programs.

3. Providing the Right Services to the Right Person at the Right Time Is Key.

Target those who can benefit from your services. For example, sector-based training programs make considerable investments in finding the right candidates. They frequently test for the basic skills necessary to master the technical aspects of training and establish industry/occupation-specific entrance requirements (e.g., a driver's license with no more than five violation points). In fact, sector programs act as a filter between employers and disadvantaged job seekers, assisting those who—with specific training and support—have the potential to be successful. Transitional jobs, on the other hand, may work best for those who have little or no experience (or

need more recent job experience). Different strategies will be appropriate, depending on whether someone arrives at your door right out of prison or jail and in need of an immediate paycheck—or if they come with a degree of stability and looking to increase their skills and advance to better jobs.

Meet participants where they are. Understanding your participants' skills and needs will help you identify not only the right employment strategy, but also the other kinds of support they will require. Substance abusers may need to be connected with treatment before they can realistically think about working. Mental health issues may need to be addressed for many returning prisoners. Nearly all of the studies reviewed for this guide point to the importance of fully assessing where participants are in their lives and ensuring that program interventions are specifically tailored to meet them there. Many of the more successful employment strategies have some degree of case management services embedded in them. Help with transportation, child support issues or a referral for housing or legal services can be critical to helping a formerly incarcerated person stay in training or on the job. It is also imperative to establish some continuity for newly released prisoners between services they received while incarcerated, like substance abuse treatment or mental healthcare, and services available on the outside.

Be realistic about what interventions can achieve. One of the things that is often documented in the reviewed research is the extent to which different types of programs are often, perhaps inadvertently, held to the same standard. What can programs expect of a short-term transitional jobs experience? Must it be life changing? Is it realistic to think that a transitional jobs program will have the same scale of impact as a long-term training program? Or that a simple placement in a low-wage job will be adequate to move someone out of poverty?

Some interventions may have the capacity to permanently alter the trajectory of someone's life (and, as such, may be worth the significant investment of resources they typically require). Sector-based training programs, for example, help participants build skills that may position them for a lifetime of better jobs and higher income. Not all programs can reasonably be expected to have that kind of impact. But different approaches are appropriate for different people at different times.

Provide connections to "next step" programs. In the same way that it is important to be realistic about what different interventions can achieve, it is also important to link one kind of opportunity to another. Programs that focus on getting people immediately into jobs or that emphasize paid work experience may be best seen as something to *build on*—providing a limited range of benefits for participants, but with clear next steps up the ladder. Programs that help graduates understand and take these next steps may be invaluable for disadvantaged job seekers, including those with a criminal record.

Final Thoughts

Although we tend to talk about employment strategies in sweeping general categories—such as transitional jobs, rapid attachment or sectoral programs—they look quite different on the ground. In fact, the studies that examine these approaches note considerable differences in the way program operations looked from site to site. It is critical that we mine these implementation lessons to better understand what specifically led to the success—or failure—of different strategies.

Future studies should document program costs, funding streams and partnership structures; examine the impact of various program practices for different groups of formerly incarcerated individuals; and further explore the relationship between employment and recidivism. This research—and the work of dedicated reentry practitioners around the country—will continue to illuminate the approaches that are most effective in helping those returning from prisons and jails to find and keep jobs and successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Additional Resources



Chart 1: The Workforce Development System at the Federal Level

Adapted from Beth Siegel and Karl Seidman²⁶

US Department of Education	US Department of Labor	US Department of Agriculture	US Department of Health and Human Services	US Department of Housing and Development	US Department of Energy
<p>Adult Education: Funding for adult literacy distributed to states on a formula basis.</p> <p>Pell Grants: Provide financial aid for low-income students.</p> <p>Carl D. Perkins Act: Funds vocational training at postsecondary educational institutions.</p> <p>Vocational Rehabilitation: States grant training for the disabled.</p>	<p>Workforce Investment Act (WIA): Funds distributed to states that focus on universal access for core services, integrated services through One Stop Centers for training, dual customer approach.</p> <p>Wagner-Peyser Funds: Support employment services such as job search and job referral.</p> <p>Competitive grants such as WIRED, Regional Innovation Grants.</p> <p>Trade Adjustment Assistance: Helps workers displaced due to import-related layoffs or closures.</p>	<p>Food Stamp Education and Training (Now SNAP-ET): Provides funding for training for eligible food stamp recipients.</p>	<p>Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): State block grants that replaced welfare; provide support for training with significant limitations.</p> <p>Social Services Block Grants: Can be used by states for limited education and training services.</p> <p>Community Service Block Grants: Can be used by CAP agencies for education and training.</p>	<p>Community Development Block Grants: Can be used by cities for education and training services for low- and moderate-income individuals.</p>	<p>Green Collar Job Training: Through the 2007 Green Jobs Act, including Pathways Out of Poverty program for low-income individuals.</p> <p>Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program (EECBG): Can be used for workforce development.</p> <p>State Energy Program (SEP): Funds can be used for education and training.</p>

Chart 2: Levels of Rigor in Research

As Adapted from *Evaluation (Second Edition)* by Carol H. Weiss²⁷

Level	Methodology	Benefits	Things to Consider
Level 1: Anecdotal Evidence	Stories from a limited population.	Can be interesting places to start thinking about future research.	Does not really tell us anything about larger trends—the anecdotal experiences of one person or a small group may be completely out of sync with larger trends.
Level 2: Qualitative Research	Examines phenomena primarily through words and tends to focus on dynamics, meaning and context. Qualitative research typically uses observation, interviewing and document reviews to collect data.	Qualitative research can be an excellent first step in learning about a problem, identifying key relationships and gaining a deeper understanding of what possible solutions may be.	Qualitative research does not produce definitive outcomes about what works and what doesn't. Unlike in quantitative analysis, the validity of qualitative research cannot be tested and local observations may not be extendable to larger populations.
Level 3: Quasi-Experimental Research	Treatment and comparison groups are selected <i>non-randomly</i> , but some controls are introduced to minimize threats to the validity of conclusions.	Quasi-experimental research is often used in the field under real-life conditions in which the evaluator cannot assign groups randomly. It can be useful in determining the effect of different policies, examining different demographic characteristics, etc. Most well-run quasi-experimental research also succeeds in limiting any selection bias that might affect results.	Researchers can never be sure they have eliminated selection bias and that some internal characteristics of the participants, and not the treatment, are really driving the effect observed.
Level 4: Randomized Controlled Trials	Participants are selected <i>randomly</i> into treatment (those who receive the intervention) and control (those who do not receive the intervention) groups. The results of the two groups are compared; the differences in these outcomes is said to be the "treatment effect"—i.e., the effect of the intervention initiated.	RCTs are believed to be the gold standard of social science research. Since participants are randomly assigned into treatment or control groups, RCTs remove selection bias that could be obscuring true results. By doing this, researchers remove the threat that characteristics of the researchers or participants could be driving outcomes rather than the treatment itself. Because they get rid of selection bias, RCTs are thought to be the most accurate gauge of actual program impact.	RCTs are time consuming and expensive, and are often not a good fit for evaluations of new programs still tweaking their research designs. They require significant commitments of time and resources; they also require that participants selected into the control group be turned away for services. RCTs may not be a good match for organizations with limited capacity or those that have missions to serve all who request services.

Rapid Attachment: Key Studies

One of the earliest random assignment studies of rapid attachment focused on California's Jobs-First GAIN, a mandatory welfare-to-work program that operated in Los Angeles County from 1995 through 1998. Participants were required to actively take part in program services or face reductions in cash benefits. The study found that participants worked more and earned more than members of the control group (more than \$2,000 over two years). The program also resulted in significant reductions in state expenditures on welfare and food stamps. However, most participants did not work full time, and few had access to benefits; most important, their overall incomes did *not* significantly increase as a result of their participation (with gains from employment being offset by reductions in welfare payments). It is notable that participants with fewer barriers to employment (those with a GED and some work experience) benefited more than those with several barriers.²⁸

A second random assignment study evaluated the effects of 12 programs implemented from 2000 through 2003 as part of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project. Program sites were located around the country with models that varied widely. Of the 12 programs evaluated, only three produced positive impacts, and each of those provided at least one service beyond basic job search assistance, including financial incentives for job retention (the Texas site), retention and advancement services (the Riverside, CA, site) and a focus on career ladders (the Chicago site). Together, these findings suggest that support beyond immediate job search assistance may lead to better results.²⁹

Earnings impacts were also found in the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS). NEWWS programs were implemented in seven sites nationwide, again with program models that varied considerably. Some programs encouraged immediate employment, while others provided education and training prior to employment services (but withheld welfare payments if participants failed to meet program requirements); still others provided both employment and education services, assigning participants to one service first depending on assessments of their skills and needs. Results were positive across all models, with increased employment and earnings and decreased welfare receipt. But the largest earnings impacts were found among participants who were offered employment and education services—they earned \$5,150 more than control group members over five years.³⁰

There have been fewer—and much less rigorous—studies of rapid attachment strategies for the formerly incarcerated. Two federally funded efforts, the Prisoner Reentry Initiative and Ready4Work, emphasized getting former prisoners into jobs quickly; both also offered additional services, such as case management and mentoring. P/PV's evaluation of Ready4Work suggested that the mentoring component may be particularly promising. Participants who met with a mentor were more than twice as likely to find jobs, compared with participants who did not, and they stayed in those jobs longer. These findings were considered preliminary because of the study design, but they were encouraging enough that lawmakers included funding for mentoring when drafting the Second Chance Act.

Providing Paid Work Experience *in Action*: Rubicon Programs, Social Enterprise

Located in Richmond, CA, the employment program run by Rubicon and evaluated as part of P/PV's Fathers at Work demonstration included job readiness training and paid short-term skills training. Funds generated from Rubicon's property maintenance, landscaping and baking businesses helped the organization subsidize training. Some participants received paid transitional employment while beginning self-directed job search activities, and staff supplemented participants' job search efforts with individualized job development and placement assistance. In addition, a wide array of social services—including housing assistance, mental healthcare, peer support groups and on-site child support assistance—were available through a partnership with the Contra Costa Department of Child Support Services (DCSS).

Providing Paid Work Experience *in Action*: Alternative Staffing Organizations

In alternative staffing models, nonprofits provide temporary and direct-hire placements to employers. Like conventional temporary staffing businesses, Alternative Staffing Organizations (ASOs) charge employers a fee—in the form of a markup on the hourly bill—for finding candidates to staff their openings, and the worker is on the payroll of the ASO. However, unlike conventional staffing businesses (though much like traditional workforce development programs), an ASO's primary goal is to help job seekers with barriers to employment gain entry into the workforce and build experience. Alternative staffing programs serve a variety of disadvantaged job seekers, including those with disabilities, youth, older adults, recovering drug users and formerly incarcerated individuals. The Alternative Staffing Alliance reports that approximately 50 organizations in the US and Canada are operating alternative staffing programs, 72 percent of which served formerly incarcerated individuals as a major client population in 2009.³¹

The alternative staffing field is relatively new, so there is not yet much rigorous research on the model's impact. However, an outcomes study conducted by P/PV in 2009 found that alternative staffing organizations couple job brokering with supportive services in a way that may be promising for helping disadvantaged job seekers gain entry into the workforce.³² Notably, the study found that participants with criminal records fared as well as other participants in several of the programs. At all but one site, people with criminal records were equally likely to be placed as those without. And at two sites, they worked, on average, more days on assignment. This suggests that alternative staffing programs may have potential to help “level the playing field” for job seekers with criminal backgrounds.

For more information about this strategy, see *An Alternative to Temporary Staffing: Considerations for Workforce Practitioners*, published by P/PV in July 2012.

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