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FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF SAMPLE OF
PRE-RELEASE PEER COUNSELORS

This report examines the return rate of a sample of pre-release peer counselors.

The highlights of this report are presented in the following Executive Summary and illustrative graphics.

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**FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF SAMPLE OF
PRE-RELEASE PEER COUNSELORS**

HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Purpose of Research.** The purpose of this research was to expand on previous studies of Pre-Release Program participants to examine the return rates of Pre-Release peer counselors. This study examines the question, "How do the return rates of Pre-Release peer counselors compare to overall Department return rate?"
2. **Research Design.** In line with the request of the Associate Director of Pre-Release Services, a sample of 116 peer counselors who had functioned in the capacity for a minimum of six months and who had been released for a minimum of 12 months were tracked to determine the number of returns to the Department.
3. **Comparison of Return Rate of Peer Counselors and Overall Return Rate of Department Releases.** The actual return rate (14.7%) of the peer counselors was substantially less than their projected rate based on the Department's overall return rate (25.9%).
4. **Comparison to Return Rates of Offenders Who Complete Pre-Release Program and Peer Counselors.** It may be logically asked how the return of this sample of peer counselors compares to the previous samples of offenders who completed the Pre-Release Program. Using the Department's overall return rate as a reference point, it may be concluded that the peer counselors have a lower return rate than those offenders who complete the program. Such a conclusion should not be unexpected in view of the more intensive and extended involvement of the peer counselors in the program than inmates who only complete one program cycle.
5. **Conclusion.** Similar to the previous research on offenders who complete the Pre-Release Services Program class cycle, the findings of this study suggest a positive relationship between serving as a Pre-Release peer counselor and satisfactory adjustment in the community (as measured by return to the Department).

FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF SAMPLE OF PRE-RELEASE PEER COUNSELORS

As an extension of the ongoing research series on the Department's Pre-Release Program, the present report examines the return rate of a sample of offenders who participated as a peer counselor in a Pre-Release Services Program for a minimum of six months.

Pre-Release Program Description. In 1971, a group of inmates at Green Haven Correctional Facility, assisted by a New York City nonprofit organization, initiated a program in which inmates helped other inmates to prepare for release through referrals, services, classes, and peer counseling. The concept spread to several other facilities.

By 1977, Pre-Release was established as a Department program. The goals of the program are to assist inmates to use their period of incarceration productively and to make a successful transition to their families and communities upon release. Inmates who leave prison with employment or employment prospects, strong family relationships, an educational or vocational background, housing, and information about available support services have a higher probability of succeeding upon release. The facility Pre-Release Centers seek to assist inmates in achieving these goals prior to release in order to maximize their chances for success.

The Centers are administered by civilian staff but have the unique feature of being run by inmates for inmates. The program focuses on two areas:

1. Services to all inmates throughout their incarceration: assistance in obtaining documents pertinent to release preparation (e.g. Social Security cards); referrals and information; and peer counseling
2. A program of classes held for inmates approaching release. The classes cover a wide variety of topics: job search strategies, interview skills, job retention skills, consumer skills, family relationships and parenting skills, legal rights and conditions of parole.

The ongoing services are available to all interested inmates. Classes are open to all inmates preparing to meet the Parole Board or to be released through conditional release or maximum expiration of sentence. There are no screening mechanisms for participation in this voluntary program. Traditionally, the Centers have provided a large portion of their services to inmates who have relatively few resources with which to prepare for release: those with limited education and vocational skills, weak family relationships, and lack of work experience. For these inmates, the Centers often play a major role in finding housing, obtaining employment, and accessing community services.

These Centers have been operated on an independent basis by each facility with relatively limited resources. Program Services staff have been assigned supervisory responsibility for the Centers and supplies and space have been provided. Course content, program format, staff participation levels and coordination with facility Parole staff have been determined at the facility level. In mid-1985 the Department initiated efforts to strengthen, expand and standardize this program throughout the State. A directive was developed, the number of Centers increased significantly, the curriculum expanded, and resource materials were developed.

Previous Follow-Up Research Regarding Participants in Pre-Release Program. As part of this overall effort to strengthen the Department's Pre-Release Program, the Deputy Commissioner for Program Services and the Coordinator of Pre-Release and Transitional Services requested in 1986 that research be initiated regarding the return rates of Pre-Release Services Program participants.

In response to this request, a series of two follow-up studies were conducted in 1986 and 1989. The findings of both studies were very encouraging. These two studies consistently found that offenders who completed the surveyed Pre-Release Services Programs returned at a considerably lower rate than those who did not complete these programs. 1/

Expansion of Research to Peer Counselors. During the course of the most recent study, plans were developed for the logical extension of this research to the peer counselors, who work in the Department's Pre-Release Centers.

The preceding research had focused on the participants in this program. This additional study would compile comparative data on the return rates of those offenders who functioned as peer counselors in these Centers for extended time periods. This expanded research would examine the question of whether or not peer counselors also had a lower than expected return rate.

The Role of the Peer Counselors. Before examining the return rates of these individuals, it is important to review the role of the peer counselor.

1/ Follow-Up Study of Sample of Pre-Release Program Participants. New York State Department of Correctional Services, September 1986 and March 1989.

Under the direction of a Pre-Release Coordinator, Pre-Release peer counselors assist other inmates in their efforts to prepare for release and return to their families and communities. There are two basic requirements for becoming a peer counselor. First, they must have a high school diploma or have earned their GED, and second, they must demonstrate a desire to assist and provide positive guidance to inmates preparing for release.

To enhance the counseling skills of peer counselors and to facilitate their abilities to assist others, peer counselors receive training in areas such as Parenting Skills, Aggression Replacement Training, Basic Life Skills, Veterans Assistance, and Employment Development Skills.

In addition to providing positive leadership and assistance to other inmates, peer counselors must have the ability to communicate effectively with facility staff and community based organizations in their efforts to obtain professional assistance and support.

Focus of Research. It is generally accepted that the peer counselors play a key role in the provision of pre-release services to the other inmates who participate in this program. This research was designed to address the related question of whether or not the extended and intensive involvement of the peer counselors in the Pre-Release Services Program also serve to assist their community adjustment as measured by a lower than expected return rate.

Sample Selection. A threshold issue in this follow-up research was the selection of an appropriate study sample of peer counselors

An effort was made to balance the need to select relatively recent peer counselors (who are reflective of the current program operation) with the need for an adequate follow-up period. All facilities with Pre-Release Centers were requested to supply the names and identification numbers of peer counselors who had been released or transferred from their facilities. To assure that the sample was representative of the peer counselor population, the follow-up sample included only those cases who served in a peer counselor role for a minimum of six months.

The sample was then screened for cases which had been released from the Department for a period of time to allow for an adequate follow-up period. It is standard Department policy in recidivism research that a follow-up period of at least one year is necessary.

Follow-Up Period and Procedure. As stated, an exposure period of at least 12 months is required for valid analysis of return rates. For this reason, a cut-off date for release from Department custody of September 1, 1988 was set to insure a follow-up period of at least 12 months as of August 31, 1989. There were 116 peer counselors who participated for a minimum of six months who met the release criteria.

The Department's computerized admission records were then used to track the peer counselor release cohort to determine the number returned to the Department's custody.

Development of Projected Return Rate and Comparison to Overall Return Rate of Department Releases. For general comparison purposes, the average return rate of Department releases is used in Department recidivism studies.

The Bureau of Records and Statistical Analysis tracks all Department releases to generate return rate statistics. Using the average return rate of all Department releases during 1987, a projected return rate can be developed for the program participants based on the number of months since their release.

The sampled program participants released in January to December 1987 would have been in the community for 21 to 32 months as of August 31, 1989, and those released between January and August of 1988 would have been in the community between 12 and 20 months.

A projected monthly return rate was then applied to the number of program participants released in each month of 1987 and 1988 to generate the number of expected returns.

The projected returns represent the number of returns which would be expected if the peer counselor sample return at a rate equal to all other Department releases exposed for similar time periods.

<u>Release Year of Pre-Release Peer Counselors</u>	<u>Number Released</u>		<u>Projected Return Rate</u>		<u>Projected Number Returned By August 31, 1989</u>
1987	53	X	32.1%	=	17
1988	<u>63</u>	X	<u>20.5%</u>	=	<u>13</u>
TOTAL	116	X	25.9%	=	30

It can be projected that 30 (25.9%) of the peer counselors released and in the community for a minimum of 12 months would be returned to the Department by August 31, 1989.

Comparison of Actual and Projected Return Rates. The following table compares the actual and projected return rates.

<u>Release Year of Pre-Release Peer Counselors</u>	<u>Projected Number</u>	<u>Return Rate Percent</u>	<u>Actual Number</u>	<u>Actual Percent</u>
1987	17	32.1%	11	20.8%
1988	<u>13</u>	<u>20.5%</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>9.5%</u>
TOTAL	30	25.9%	17	14.7%

The return rate of the peer counselors (14.7%) was substantially less than their projected rate based on the Department's overall release population (25.9%).

Conclusion. In brief terms, the major finding of this survey may be summarized in the following fashion:

The sample of peer counselors had a considerably lower return rate than their projected rate based on the Department's overall release population.

It may be asked how the return rate of this sample of peer counselors compares to the return rates of the previous samples of offenders who completed (and did not complete) the program. A direct comparison is not possible due to the varying follow-up periods of these samples and other factors. However, a general comparison may be made using the Department's overall return rate as a reference point.

In both previous studies of Pre-Release Services Program participants, those offenders who complete the program had notably lower return rates than those who did not complete the program. In comparison to the Department's overall return rate, these program completers consistently returned at a slightly lower rate (3% less in the 1989 study). In contrast, the present sample of peer counselors returned at a considerably lower rate than the Department's overall return rate (a 11% lower rate).

Based on this comparison, it may be concluded that the peer counselors have a lower return rate than those offenders who complete the program. Such a conclusion should not be unexpected in view of the more intensive and extended involvement of the peer counselors in the program than inmates who only complete one program cycle.

In reviewing this finding, it may be argued that those inmates who served as peer counselors were more motivated than both those who did not participate in and those who did complete these programs and that this factor is related to their future satisfactory adjustment on parole. As such, it could be contended that these individuals might be expected to do well on parole.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the possible existence of this self-selection bias does not logically lead to the conclusion that the intensive program involvement to these motivated offenders as peer counselors is unnecessary or uneconomical. On the contrary, it may be argued that it is appropriate correctional policy to offer such individuals opportunities to maximize their potential for successful reintegration into the community while also providing a worthwhile service to other inmates in the Pre-Release Centers.

This research was designed to analyze the relation of serving as a Pre-Release peer counselor and post-release recidivism without attempting to attribute any observed differences wholly to the impact of this program involvement. As such, the lower return rate of the sample of peer counselors may be jointly attributed to the offenders' motivation, capabilities, other program participation and the impact of their Pre-Release Services Program function.

In closing, the reader is cautioned against any definitive conclusions regarding the Department's overall Pre-Release Services Program based on this research. However, the findings of this study do suggest a positive relationship between serving as a Pre-Release peer counselor and satisfactory adjustment in the community (as measured by return to the Department).