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Work Experience
With Successful
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PREP Study Links UNICOR Work Experience With Successful Post-Release Outcome

By William G. Saylor and Gerald G. Gaes

This report summarizes some of the initial findings of the Post Release Employment Project (PREP) conducted by the Office of Research and Evaluation. The PREP study was designed to answer fundamental questions about the effect of prison vocational training and work experience on offenders' behavior when they are released to the community.

PREP is primarily an analysis of the differences between Federal offenders who received training and work experience (the study group) and similar offenders who did not participate in these activities (the comparison group).

The study and comparison groups were also contrasted with a "baseline" group of offenders who represented all other inmates released in the same time frame as the study and comparison offenders.

Background and Methodology

Preparation for the Post-Release Employment Project began in 1983. Data collection on post-release outcomes for more than 7,000 inmates continued, for the most part, into early 1987, although some data came in as late as October 1987.

Throughout the duration of this project, in which study and comparison inmates were released from the Bureau (1984 through 1986), about 35 percent of inmates in institutions with Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR) operations were employed by UNICOR. Currently, 32 percent of inmates in such institutions are employed by UNICOR.

We do not know whether there is an optimal level of UNICOR employment in an institution. Increasing or decreasing the percentage of inmates employed in prison industries may or may not increase the positive effects of employment. Consequently, the conclusions of this study could be influenced by the proportion of inmates employed by UNICOR.

Unlike most studies of prison vocational training or work experience, PREP is a prospective, longitudinal study. Study inmates were identified by case management staff at the institution over a period of several years. Inmates were selected for the study group prior to their release if they had participated in industrial work for at least 6 months or had received vocational instruction. The study group is composed primarily of inmates with UNICOR work experience -

57 percent had exclusively UNICOR work experience, while 19 percent had a combination of UNICOR work experience and vocational training, or apprenticeship training. The remaining 24 percent were involved in some combination of vocational or apprenticeship training.

The comparison group was chosen to be as much like the study group as possible. A comparison observation was selected specifically for each study group member from a cohort of individuals who were released during the same calendar quarter. Each pairing was based on an exact match of gender and individual security level and on the closest possible match in criminal, educational, and employment histories and characteristics of the current offense.

While the study and comparison groups were similar to each other in terms of expected length of stay, individuals in these groups were much more likely to have a longer expected length of stay than inmates in the baseline group.¹ In addition, the conviction offense for study and comparison groups tended to be more serious than the baseline group. These differences are especially significant because they underscore the fact that PREP study participants were by no means those individuals who seemed most predisposed to succeed in either a prison program or in the community after release. See Table 1 (page 3) for specific information on these three groups.²

Institutional Adjustment

An argument for continuing or even expanding industrial work opportunities in prisons is that such programs are necessary to cope effectively with inmate idleness and

that they help to ensure the orderly running of correctional institutions. This is not an issue directly addressed by the PREP study. To explore this issue, a research design would have to evaluate changes in institutional misconduct patterns related to the expansion or contraction of prison industries. Comparison among prison systems that have varying degrees of industrial work programs is very difficult since prison systems are often different in many other ways as well.

In this section, we address a more focused question: *Do inmates working in prison industries or participating in vocational training evidence better institutional adjustment than their matched comparison counterparts?*

Table 2 (page 5) shows the results of three measures that suggest *study group participants did show better institutional adjustment*. First, study group members were less likely to have a misconduct report within their last year of incarceration and, second, when they did, it was less likely to have been for serious misconduct. Third, study group participants were rated by their unit teams to have a higher level of responsibility than their comparison counterparts. An inmate's level of responsibility refers to his/her level of dependability, financial responsibility, and the nature of his/her interaction with staff and other inmates.

Halfway House Outcomes

The Bureau of Prisons contracts with halfway houses to provide qualifying inmates an opportunity, prior to the end of their imprisonment, to work in the

Table 1¹

Comparison Among Study, Comparison, and Baseline Offenders

Severity of Current Offense²

	Comparison Group		Study Group		Baseline Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
Lowest	7.7	(219)	7.6	(152)	11.8	(1619)
Low Moderate	34.2	(977)	30.1	(606)	38.7	(5331)
Moderate	33.9	(968)	34.8	(700)	32.0	(4400)
High	16.6	(474)	16.4	(331)	13.1	(1808)
Greatest	7.6	(217)	11.1	(224)	4.4	(602)
Total		(2855)		(2013)		(13760)

Type of Prior Commitments

	Comparison Group		Study Group		Baseline Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
None	44.1	(1259)	49.5	(966)	50.5	(6952)
Minor	17.8	(507)	17.7	(356)	17.2	(2370)
Serious	38.1	(1089)	32.8	(661)	32.3	(4438)
Total		(2855)		(2013)		(13760)

Projected Length of Incarceration

	Comparison Group		Study Group		Baseline Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
0-12 Months	25.3	(721)	27.0	(544)	43.4	(5977)
13-59 Months	71.6	(2045)	67.7	(1361)	53.9	(7421)
60-83 Months	2.4	(68)	4.4	(88)	2.1	(282)
84 + Months	0.7	(21)	1.0	(20)	0.6	(80)
Total		(2855)		(2013)		(13760)

¹The results reported in this table are statistically significant. Percentages may not total 100.0 due to rounding.

² Offense severity categories presented above are those used by the Bureau of Prisons to classify inmates. "Greatest" severity offenses include homicide, rape, kidnaping, and espionage, while "lowest" severity offenses are primarily personal drug use and property offenses (up to \$2,000).

community. This is also the first opportunity to recidivate. Although most study offenders were released through a halfway house, many of the comparison inmates were released directly to community supervision. Table 3 (page 6) depicts some of the important halfway house outcome information collected in the PREP study.

The variable disposition shows that *almost the same proportion of study (83.9 percent) and comparison (83.3 percent) inmates successfully completed their halfway house stay.* On average, study inmates spent 98.0 days in the halfway house environment prior to their release to community supervision, while comparison inmates spent 93.5 days. Table 3 also shows that *study observations were 24.4 percent more likely than comparison observations to obtain a full-time job at some point during their halfway house stay.* Of the 3,070 study inmates released through a halfway house, 86.5 percent obtained a full-time job, while only 62.1 percent of the 1043 comparison inmates released through a halfway house had worked at a full-time job. Study observations were also 7.7 percent more likely to obtain day labor employment (e.g., a 1-day job performing unskilled labor at a construction site). Nevertheless, both study and comparison group members who obtained employment spent the same proportion of their entire halfway house stay on their job (on average, about 4.1 and 1.5 days per week on full-time and day labor jobs respectively).

One of the responsibilities of staff at halfway houses is to provide employment counseling. As can be seen from Table 3, most offenders get jobs through their own resources. Study inmates, however, were

more likely to get employment help from their friends or from an employment agency than were comparison inmates. This was true for the longest and most recently held job. Finally, for inmates who left their longest held job at the halfway house, most study offenders quit in order to get a better job, although 7.8 percent were fired and 23.8 percent were laid off. Comparison subjects were more likely to quit their jobs for reasons other than to get a better job.

In summary, at the point of halfway house release, both study and comparison offenders were equally likely to successfully complete their halfway house stay, although study inmates were far more likely to obtain a full-time or day labor job.

Post-Release Outcome

Once released to community supervision, offenders in the PREP study were followed by making phone calls to their supervising probation officers. Follow-up occurred at 6- and 12-month intervals. However, monthly information was collected over the entire interval.

Table 4 (page 9) shows the 6- and 12-month dispositions for study and comparison subjects. At both the 6- and 12-month follow-up points, *study group offenders were less likely to have been revoked from supervision.* Although not depicted in Table 4, study and comparison groups were statistically indistinguishable in their reason (parole violation vs. new offense) for being revoked at both the 6- and 12-month junctures. Nevertheless, the predominant reason for

Table 2¹

Institutional Adjustment

Frequency of Disciplinary Reports Within the Last Year

	Comparison Group		Study Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
None	73.8	(766)	77.7	(587)
One or More	26.2	<u>(272)</u>	22.2	<u>(168)</u>
Total		(1038)		(755)

Type and Frequency of Most Serious Disciplinary Reports

	Comparison Group		Study Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
Any "Greatest"	2.6	(27)	1.6	(12)
More than One "High" within the Last 2 Years	3.5	(36)	2.4	(18)
Only One "High" within the Last 2 Years	10.5	(109)	9.3	(70)
More than One "Moderate" within the Last Year	2.9	(30)	2.4	(18)
Only One "Moderate" within the Last Year	8.4	(87)	9.1	(69)
More than One "Low/Moderate" within the Last Year	.3	(3)	0.0	(0)
None	71.3	<u>(740)</u>	73.9	<u>(558)</u>
Total		(1038)		(755)

Level of Responsibility

	Comparison Group		Study Group	
	%	# obs.	%	# obs.
Poor	7.4	(77)	2.9	(22)
Average	40.7	(423)	37.5	(283)
Good	51.8	<u>(538)</u>	59.6	<u>(450)</u>
Total		(1038)		(755)

¹ The results reported in this table are statistically significant. Percentages may not total 100.0 due to rounding.

Table 3¹

Halfway House Outcome Data

Disposition

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Escapes	6.8	5.2
New Arrests	0.1	0.5
Return to Custody	9.1	8.4
Successful Completion	83.3	83.9
Other	0.7	2.0
Number of Observations	(1042)	(3070)

Percent Obtaining Full-Time or Day Labor Employment²

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Full-Time Job	62.1	86.5
Day Labor Job	1.3	9.0
Number of Observations	(1043)	(3070)

Person or Agency Responsible for Finding Most Recently Held Job

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Halfway House	13.6	15.7
Offender	57.3	51.6
Friends	4.8	13.6
Relatives	6.8	8.2
Employment Agency	2.5	6.2
Other	15.0	4.7
Number of Observations	(646)	(2649)

(Continued on next page)

¹ The results reported in this table are statistically significant. Percentages may not total 100.0 due to rounding.

² These two categories, full-time and day labor, are not mutually exclusive.

Table 3 (continued)
Halfway House Outcome Data

Person or Agency Responsible for Finding the Longest Held Job³

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Halfway House	18.9	16.1
Offender	51.4	49.8
Friends	2.7	15.0
Relatives	8.1	6.7
Employment Agency	6.4	8.6
Other	13.5	3.8
Number of Observations	(37)	(257)

Reason Why Offender Left Longest Held Job

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Fired	3.0	7.8
Laid Off	9.1	23.8
Quit for a Better Job	33.3	44.1
Quit - Other Reason	54.6	24.2
Number of Observations	(33)	(256)

³This subtable excludes individuals whose longest held job is also their most recently held job.

revocation during each 6-month period (60 - 70 percent) for both groups was a parole violation rather than a new offense.

Furthermore, inmates who participated exclusively in UNICOR were also less likely to have their supervision revoked than were comparison group offenders. Although the magnitude of difference may seem small, the differences are both statistically significant and substantively meaningful.

At the 12-month time period, 10.1 percent of comparison offenders had been revoked, while only 6.6 percent of study offenders had been revoked. In other recidivism studies conducted by the Bureau, about 20 percent of released inmates were revoked or rearrested within a year of their release. In 1980, the percentage was 19.4, in 1982, 23.9, and in 1987, 19.2.

The differences among study, comparison, and baseline groups indicate several important conclusions: (1) Due to the research design and the matching methodology, there are characteristics of both study and comparison offenders that decrease their likelihood of recidivating; (2) UNICOR work experience and vocational training further increases the likelihood of post-release success; (3) Had we compared the study group to a normal baseline group, even with statistical controls, it is likely we would have exaggerated the differences between offenders who participated in work and vocational training and those who did not.

Table 5 (*page 10*) shows the proportion of study and comparison group offenders who were employed during the follow-up period in any given month. It also shows the

average wages earned in each month, as well as the 6- and 12-month totals. Although not indicated in Table 5, there is a tremendous amount of variability in post-release wages, which is probably why most comparisons did not reach statistical significance. The table shows that study group offenders were more likely to be employed in any of the 12 months following their release to the community. At the end of 12 months, study group inmates had averaged about \$200 more in wages than comparison group offenders. Although this result was not statistically significant, it seems to be a pattern worthy of continued observation.

In summary, inmates who participated in UNICOR work and other vocational programming during their imprisonment showed better adjustment, were less likely to be revoked at the end of their first year back in the community, were more likely to be employed in the halfway house and community, and earned slightly more money in the community than inmates who had similar background characteristics, but who did not participate in work and vocational training programs.

Future Analyses and Reports

The analyses discussed in this report represent only the most fundamental differences between study and comparison offenders. Future analyses will address mobility issues - the impact of prison work and vocational training on changes in occupations before, during, and after release from prison. We will also analyze specific occupational work and training effects to the extent the

Table 4¹
Post-Release Outcome Data — Disposition²

Disposition - 6 Months

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Completed	12.7	10.0
Under Supervision	81.2	85.1
Revoked	6.2	4.9
Number of Observations	(2495)	(2236)

Disposition — 12 Months

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %
Completed	8.5	7.9
Under Supervision	81.4	85.6
Revoked	10.1	6.6
Number of Observations	(1829)	(1502)

¹The data reported in this table are statistically significant. Percentages may not total 100.0 due to rounding.

²The data in Table 4 show that about 600 - 700 fewer inmates from each group were represented in the 12-month followup than in the 6-month followup. The reason for this is that when the PREP study was terminated, there were about that number of offenders still in the "pipeline" for whom no 12-month outcome data was collected.

Table 5¹
Post-Release Outcome Data — Employment²

Percentage of Offenders Employed in
Each of the First 6 Months:

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %	Statistical Significance
Month 1	65.6	74.7	*
Month 2	65.5	75.1	*
Month 3	65.8	74.2	*
Month 4	64.7	72.8	*
Month 5	63.7	71.1	*
Month 6	61.1	68.6	*
Number of Observations	(2506)	(2253)	

Percentage of Offenders Employed in
Each of the Latter 6 Months

	Comparison Group %	Study Group %	Statistical Significance
Month 7	71.8	79.2	*
Month 8	70.7	77.1	*
Month 9	68.8	76.1	*
Month 10	66.7	74.3	*
Month 11	64.9	72.9	*
Month 12	63.1	71.7	*
Number of Observations	(1831)	(1503)	

(Continued on next page)

¹In this table, significant contrasts are noted with an "**," while "n.s." is used to indicate "not significant." Also, percentages may not total 100.0 due to rounding.

²The increase in the percentage employed between months 6 and 7 for both groups is a statistical artifact. This is because the percentages are based on the number of observations still under supervision at the end of each 6-month interval. However, this does not influence the monthly comparisons between the two groups.

For the same reason, the average wages (shown on the continuation page of Table 5) diminish over each 6-month interval. This is because the wages earned during the month (the numerator) are zero for any individual who was unemployed during a month and consequently earned no money, while the number of observations (the denominator) used to calculate the average is determined by the observations still under supervision at the end of each 6-month interval. (footnote continues)

Table 5 (Continued)

Post-Release Outcome Data — Employment²Average Wages Earned in
Each of the First 6 Months

	Comparison Group \$	Study Group \$	Statistical Significance
Month 1	668.25	723.57	*
Month 2	693.45	737.17	*
Month 3	703.32	727.80	n.s.
Month 4	701.09	733.82	n.s.
Month 5	693.12	720.77	n.s.
Month 6	676.35	701.29	n.s.
Total 1 - 6 Months	\$4,135.59	\$4,344.42	n.s.
Number of Observations	(2506)	(2253)	

Average Wages Earned in
Each of the Latter 6 Months

	Comparison Group \$	Study Group \$	Statistical Significance
Month 7	851.02	846.10	n.s.
Month 8	835.92	845.98	n.s.
Month 9	828.03	833.50	n.s.
Month 10	815.57	822.21	n.s.
Month 11	793.06	822.97	n.s.
Month 12	769.45	820.97	n.s.
Total 7 - 12 Months	\$4,893.06	\$4,991.72	n.s.
Number of Observations	(1831)	(1503)	
Total 1 - 12 Months	\$9,665.88	\$9,862.82	n.s.

² (continued) Although some individuals retained a job over the entire observation period and may have maintained, or even increased, their remuneration, the average wage for the group declined due to the increase in the number of individuals who became unemployed for some period of time and therefore earned zero dollars for those months.

Summary of the Initial PREP Findings

- *Study group members demonstrated better institutional adjustment than did the participants in a comparison group. Study group members were less likely to have misconduct reports within the last year of their confinement, and when they did, it was less likely to have been for serious misconduct. Study group participants were also rated by their unit teams to have a higher level of responsibility than their comparison counterparts. An inmate's level of responsibility refers to his/her level of dependability, financial responsibility, and the nature of his/her interaction with staff and other inmates.*
- *At the point of halfway house release, both study and comparison offenders were equally likely to successfully complete their halfway house stay, although study inmates were far more likely to obtain a job.*
- *Inmates who participated in work and vocational programming during their imprisonment showed better post-release adjustment. They were less likely to recidivate by the end of their first year back in the community, were more likely to be employed in the halfway house and community, and earned slightly more money in the community than inmates who had similar background characteristics, but who did not participate in work and vocational training programs.*

data allow. Every inmate's job or vocational training was classified according to the Department of Labor's Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT). These DOT codes will allow us to look at broad, as well as more refined, classes of occupations and their impact on post-release outcome.

We have also collected economic climate data. Data such as unemployment statistics, industrial sector information, and information on the demographic characteristics of the areas to which inmates were released will allow us to examine the relative impact of these economic climate data in relation to work and vocational training.

As part of the data collected on study inmates while they were in prison, work evaluations conducted by the inmates' supervisors were gathered, as well as ratings of the inmate's performance in the vocational training courses. This performance information will allow us to examine whether the intensity of the inmate's work performance affects post-release success.

Although the impact of work and vocational training in Federal prisons has produced differences that could be viewed as modest, they are nevertheless substantial and statistically significant effects. It is also possible that further analysis will show us how to optimize our training through

specific skills acquisition. It is also likely that the economic climate of an area is an important determinant of an offender's community employment. We are well aware that many ex-offenders not only must overcome low skill levels, but also the local and global conditions that compound the already for-

midable challenge of finding and keeping a job, given the stigma of past incarceration.

If you have any questions or comments about the information presented in this article, please contact Bo Saylor or Gerry Gaes at 202/724-3118.

¹Actual time served was computed for the study and comparison groups and, as one would expect, based on the projected length of incarceration, the study group served more time than did the comparison group. On average, study group inmates served about 6 months longer than comparison group inmates.

²All of the results in Tables 1,2,3, and 4 are statistically significant. In Table 5, significant contrasts are indicated with an "*", otherwise, "n.s." is noted for "not significant." Statistical tests in Tables 1 through 4 and the employment data for Table 5 are chi-square tests for differences in proportions. The statistical test for employment wages in Table 5 were based on t-tests of differences in group means. We have also noted in each table the different number of observations. Not all information was collected or available on all observations in this study. Furthermore, as the study progressed through the post-release outcome stages, inmates would be revoked, or otherwise "drop out" of the study (e.g., successfully complete their period of supervision).