

# No Shortcuts to Successful Reentry: The Failings of Project Greenlight

By Nancy Ritter

Practitioners and researchers continue to debate the implications of an offender reentry project that not only failed to reduce recidivism, but actually may have increased it. The findings of Project Greenlight suggest that some low-cost, prison-based programs that target a large population of inmates — the type of programs that appeal to corrections officials and policy-makers dealing with ongoing budgetary constraints — may not decrease recidivism.

Designed and evaluated by the Vera Institute of Justice, Project Greenlight was an intensive rehabilitation pilot program involving 735 New York State prisoners during their final two months of incarceration. Other research studies have demonstrated the success of longer and more expensive reentry programs, and the findings discussed in an evaluation of the project, *Smoothing the Path From Prison to Home: An Evaluation of the Project Greenlight Transitional Services Demonstration Program*, also suggest “that trying to save money by compacting reentry programming into a shorter timeframe may be counter productive.”<sup>1</sup>

The NIJ-funded evaluation of Project Greenlight could not have come at a more critical time, as decision-makers struggle to balance financial and operational realities against what really works — “best practices” — in reducing criminal behavior. Over the past few decades, the number of people in U.S. prisons has increased dramatically, rising to 2.1 million by mid-2004. Yet despite a renewed interest in rehabilitation and prisoner reentry programs, there remains little agreement among

corrections officials, treatment providers, criminology researchers and evaluators, and policy-makers that such programs work, according to Urban Institute researcher Christy Visser in her introduction to the May 2006 *Criminology & Public Policy* article “Good Intentions Meet Hard Realities: An Evaluation of the Project Greenlight Reentry Program,” by James A. Wilson from Fordham University and Robert C. Davis from The Police Foundation.

## The Project

Project Greenlight took place from February 2003 to February 2004.<sup>2</sup> It studied three groups of inmates, all males, who returned to New York City after release. There were no statistically significant differences among the three groups in terms of demographics (age, race, etc.), criminal history (prior arrests and convictions, primary commitment offense, etc.), or level of education. Most of the participants were black or Hispanic and had less than a high school education.

One group of 344 inmates, referred to as the Greenlight group, was transferred to Queensboro Correctional Facility, a minimum-security institution in Queens, N.Y., for their final 60 days of incarceration. There, they received eight weeks of day-long reentry training, including:

- Cognitive skills training that focused on changing anti-social thinking and behaviors;
- Employment training, including job searching, interview preparation and workplace behavior;

- Programs designed to divert them from homeless shelters;
- Drug abuse prevention training;
- Family counseling and advice on working with parole officers upon release;
- A release plan, developed by the inmate and a case manager, including information on community-based services; and
- Practical skills training, such as time-management, budgeting, using public transportation and managing a bank account.

The second group of 278 inmates was also transferred to Queensboro, but participated in a much less ambitious reentry program run by the New York State Department of Corrections. Called Transitional Services Program (TSP), this five-week, four hours-per-day program consisted primarily of general life-skills classes. The third group of 113 inmates (called the “Upstate” group) received no reentry programming.

## The Results and Possible Reasons for Failure

Recidivism — new arrests, reincarceration and parole revocations — was measured for all three groups one year post-release. Participants in the Greenlight group performed significantly worse than participants in the other two groups. The Upstate group, which received no prerelease reentry programming, recidivated at the lowest rate.

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In determining what works, it is important to clearly define what is meant by prisoner reentry. Many practitioners in the treatment and reentry fields would agree that reentry initiatives should actively link in-prison services with community services, typically through a case manager, mentor or steering committee. For example, providing referrals, rather than after-care, has already been demonstrated in substance-abuse treatment research to be ineffective. Although Project Greenlight was labeled in the literature as a “prisoner reentry” project, it lacked the community services component many experts in the treatment and reentry fields believe is necessary to achieve effective outcomes. Therefore, it is important to be careful about interpreting Project Greenlight as a failed reentry initiative.

Wilson and Davis called the results of Project Greenlight “unexpected and puzzling.”<sup>3</sup> During an April 2005 discussion about the results, Vera researcher Michael Bobbitt, who also served as one of the Greenlight family counselors, said, “The really interesting piece, at least for me — and a lot of lay people, I would think — is that the results are not only not as good as TSP, but they’re worse than no intervention.”<sup>4</sup>

Why did Project Greenlight fail to reduce recidivism? And what does this mean for the future of reentry programs in this country? Researchers and practitioners are offering a number of explanations, including how offenders were selected and assigned to the three groups, but most of the criticism centers on how the program was designed and implemented.

**Program Design.** Was the design of the program flawed? Project Greenlight was designed to be based on empirical principles of corrections, or what researchers refer to as evidence-based best practices of what works. However, Wilson and Davis maintain that much of the research upon which Greenlight was supposedly based — a cognitive-behavior model called “Reasoning & Rehabilitation” (“R & R”) — is “fundamentally different” than the way the program was actually designed.<sup>5</sup>

For example, R & R-based programming envisions a class size of eight to 13; there were generally 26 participants in the Greenlight classes. Experts also note that many cognitive-based therapy programs, such as

R & R, are based on Canadian research, which would not have accounted for individual learning styles and cultural sensitivities, particularly in terms of race because Canada has a more homogenous population. Ninety-four percent of the Greenlight participants were Hispanic or black. “[A] significant question that has been raised, for example, is whether the R & R cognitive skills program is culturally appropriate for the largely inner-city minority populations that comprised a significant portion [of Greenlight participants],” Wilson and Davis said.

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Douglas B. Marlowe, director of the Division of Law and Ethics Research at the Treatment Research Institute at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, goes even further. In response to the Wilson and Davis analysis, he argues that the design of Project Greenlight simply was not based on proven criminology theories. “The literature [on correctional rehabilitation] is so rife with ‘noise’ touting unproven interventions that practitioners and policy-makers have difficulty separating the wheat from the chaff,” he said.<sup>6</sup>

Marlowe’s summary conclusion of the design and implementation of the program is no less indicting: “Project Greenlight seems to have delivered a hodgepodge of unproven and unstandardized clinical interventions, which could explain why it failed to produce positive effects on virtually any outcome measure.”

**Implementation.** Was the higher recidivism rate for the Greenlight participants a result of how the program was carried out — what researchers refer to as “implementation”

and “program integrity”? The training and counseling was originally designed to be four to six months, but it was reduced to two. During the April 2005 roundtable discussion of practitioners and researchers, Wilson said that if a program is too short “[y]ou can engender a lot of resistance. You release individuals to the street who may be angry or frustrated and never get to the point where you reach that therapeutic effect.”

Another issue may be the short duration of the project; although designed as a three-year study, Project Greenlight was terminated, due to fiscal constraints, after one year. Also, program compliance by the participants has been raised as a concern. Marlowe notes, for example, that only 30 percent of the Greenlight participants agreed to family counseling, and only 15 percent attended even one session. Greenlight participants also may have been angry about being assigned to the program or may have felt heightened expectations that were not met when they were released — and either of these outlooks might have led to re-offending.

Edward Rhine, Tina Mawhorr and Evalyn Parks, all with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, argue that the way Project Greenlight was carried out was not what the program designers had in mind. Also writing in the May 2006 issue of *Criminology & Public Policy*, Rhine, Mawhorr and Parks called the results “not surprising,” adding that “[w]ith the publication of the [Greenlight] evaluation and other such studies, the body of documented program evaluations resulting in disappointing outcomes has clearly reached a level of critical mass.”<sup>7</sup>

Another major problem with the implementation of Project Greenlight was a lack of post-release follow-up or aftercare in the Greenlight program, beyond the standard parole supervision — Martin Horn, commissioner of the New York City Department of Corrections, calls it “a critical variable.” Although the Greenlight group received many referrals to community services, little was done to determine their actual post-release experiences.

“If you said, ‘We’re going to send you to Project ABC and they’re going to help you find a place to live,’ and then when they get there, someone from Project ABC says, ‘Look, we haven’t

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got any places for you— come back tomorrow,’ we don’t really know what the impact of that was,” Horn said.

## Conclusion

As Visher points out, “even negative results can inform policy and practice.” Although studies such as Project Greenlight are crucial in the development of successful prisoner reentry program, Rhine, Mawhorr and Parks maintain that “this promising movement in corrections is fast approaching a major crossroads.”

These recent findings — as disappointing, surprising or not surprising as they may be — now have become a part of the critical and complex debate on the future of corrections in this country. Hopefully, the Project Greenlight results will lead to even more evidence of what works.

“[A]t a time when dollars are being poured into reentry programs,” Wilson and Davis said, “it is important that these findings be followed up with other research that can support or refute them.”

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cheryachukin, Y., J. Dauphinee, R. Davis, K. Gehi, R. Hope and J. Wilson. 2005. *Smoothing the Path From Prison to Home: An Evaluation of the Project Greenlight Transitional Services Demonstration Program*, New York: Vera Institute of Justice. Available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/213714.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/213714.pdf). pp.15-169. (December).

<sup>2</sup> Project Greenlight was part of the third “phase” of a major corrections program in New York State. Phase I, beginning with admission to prison, is a two-week development of a program based on the inmate’s goals. Phase II is 320 hours of life-skills and other programming. Phase III, targeted inmates bound for New York City, transferring them to a local facility for transitional services programs.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, J., and R. Davis. 2006. Good intentions meet hard realities: An evaluation of the Project Greenlight reentry program, *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5(2):303-338. (May).

<sup>4</sup> Participants in this roundtable discussion, hosted by the Vera Institute of Justice, were Eddie Ellis, chair of the NuLeadership Policy Group at Medgar Evers College, City University of New York; Martin Horn, commissioner of the New York City Department of Corrections; Doris MacKenzie, professor at the University of Maryland; Orlando Rodriguez, pro-

fessor at Fordham University; James Wilson, professor at Fordham University and lead investigator in the Project Greenlight evaluation; and, from Vera, Mike Bobbitt, Megan Golden, Marta Nelson, Tim Ross, and Dan Wilhelm. An edited transcript of the discussion is available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/213714.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/213714.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> In his article (see endnote 6), Douglas Marlowe describes R & R theory: “[It] presumes that criminal activity is often mediated by impulsive, rigid, and egocentric thinking. The goal, therefore, is to assist offenders to forestall impulsive action in favor of productive thought.

Offenders are taught to anticipate the consequence of their actions, consider alternative courses of action, and contemplate the impact of their conduct on other people (i.e., develop empathy and perspective-taking).”

<sup>6</sup> D.B. Marlowe. When ‘what works’ never did: Dodging the scarlet ‘M’ in correctional rehabilitation, *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5(2):339-346. (May).

<sup>7</sup> Rhine, E., Mawhorr, T. and Parks, E. Implementation: The bane of effective correctional programs, *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5(2):347-358. (May).

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