

Factories Behind Fences:

Do Prison “Real Work” Programs Work?

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When someone is in prison, does having a real job with real pay yield benefits when he or she is released? Findings from an evaluation funded by the Office of Justice Programs (OJP), National Institute of Justice (NIJ) suggest that this might be the case. Offenders who worked for private companies while imprisoned obtained employment more quickly, maintained employment longer, and had lower recidivism rates than those who worked in traditional correctional industries or were involved in “other-than-work” (OTW) activities such as a GED program, a vocational education program, a treatment program or no program at all.

“Factories behind fences” is not a new idea. Traditional industries (TI), in which offenders are supervised by correctional staff and work for a modest sum, have been a mainstay of corrections for more than 150 years. Examples of traditional industries include the manufacture of signs, furniture and garments, as well as the stereotypical license plates. By obtaining work experience in these industries, inmates acquire the skills they need to secure gainful employment upon release and avoid recidivism.

PIECP

Another program — the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP) — allows inmates to work for a private employer outside the institution and earn the prevailing wage, which is at least federal minimum wage, for a particular type of work or occupation. In comparison, TI participants earn a wage prescribed

by state legislation, ranging from no pay to \$1.25. OTW participants usually do not get paid.

Created by Congress in 1979, PIECP encourages state and local correctional agencies to form partnerships with private companies to give inmates real work opportunities.² PIECP operations have included the manufacture of aluminum screens and windows for Solar Industries Inc.; circuit boards for Joint Venture Electronics; street sweeper brushes for United Rotary Brush Corp.; corrugated boxes for PRIDE Box; gloves for Hawkeye Glove Manufacturing Inc.; and the manufacture and refurbishment of Shelby Cobra automobiles for Shelby American Management Co.

PIECP seeks to generate products and services that enable prisoners to make a contribution to society, offset the cost of incarceration, support family members and compensate crime victims. Other goals are to reduce prison idleness, increase inmate job skills and improve the prospects for prisoners’ successful transition to the community upon release.

Wages earned by PIECP participants benefit taxpayers in addition to helping the inmates themselves. Although the program requires a percentage of PIECP wages be saved to assist the inmate upon release, the remaining wages make their way back into the national economy, either directly or indirectly. For example, a significant portion of the wages earned by prisoners in the program goes directly to the state to cover the cost of prisoner room and board. PIECP wages also provide child support and alimony to family members, as well as restitution to crime victims.

More than 70,000 inmates — an average of 2,500 per year — have participated in PIECP since the program’s inception. By the end of 2005, 6,555 offenders were employed through the program. Although this number reflects a 285-percent increase in PIECP positions in the past decade, it

represents only a small fraction of the total number of inmates in our nation’s prisons and jails.

Does the Program Work?

In a sense, PIECP can be thought of as a grand experiment. After 28 years, the obvious question is: Does it work? To find out, NIJ teamed with OJP’s Bureau of Justice Assistance to fund the first national evaluation of PIECP. Researchers at the University of Baltimore compared a group of post-release inmates who worked in PIECP with inmates from two other groups — those who worked in TI and those involved in OTW activities, including those not involved in a program.³ Cindy J. Smith, Ph.D., who was at the University of Baltimore at that time, and her colleagues considered two questions: “Does PIECP participation increase post-release employment more than work in TI and OTW programs?” and “Does PIECP participation reduce recidivism more than work in TI or OTW programs?”

Study Limitations

Although the results of the PIECP study are positive — showing better outcomes for participants in the PIECP group compared with the TI and OTW groups — they do not definitively show that the better outcomes were caused by PIECP participation because the individuals in the three groups were not randomly assigned. Prisoners who volunteered to participate in a work program were interviewed by prospective employers in both TI and PIECP. Therefore, inmates who worked in either TI or PIECP were “self-selected” and may have had different motivations and backgrounds than the OTW inmates, which may have led to better outcomes for both PIECP and TI participants. The researchers attempted to ensure that the groups were comparable by matching inmates in the three groups using a number of

Table 1. Length of Continuous Employment Post-release

Length of Employment	Percent of PIECP Group	Percent of Traditional Industries Group	Percent of Other - Than-Work Group
1 year+	48.6	40.4	38.5
3 years+	13.7	10.3	10.3

factors, including demographics and time served, but this matching may not have completely eliminated the selection bias.

Overall Findings

Researchers found that PIECP participants found jobs after release more quickly and held them longer than did their counterparts in the TI and OTW groups. Approximately 55 percent of PIECP workers obtained employment within the first three months after release. Only about 40 percent of their counterparts in the TI and OTW groups found employment within that time. Nearly 49 percent of PIECP participants were employed continuously for more than one year, whereas 40.4 percent of the offenders in TI and 8.5 percent of the offenders in OTW programs were continuously employed for that length of time.

Three years after release, PIECP participants performed better than releasees from the TI or OTW groups. Almost 14 percent of PIECP releasees were employed for three continuous years, but only 10.3 percent of the other offenders maintained constant employment during that same period of time.

Examining wages earned by the participants after they were released, the researchers found that the PIECP group earned more than the TI and OTW groups. However, 55 percent of all the releasees did not earn wages equal to a full-time job at the federal minimum wage. Because the data available to the researchers reported total earnings only and not the number of hours worked, it was impossible to determine whether this was because the releasees were: working part-time, working intermittently and/or earning less than the federal minimum wage.

Recidivism

The researchers measured recidivism rates for all three groups using the traditional measures: new arrest, conviction and incarceration.⁴ The results showed that PIECP releasees had lower rates of rearrest, conviction and incarceration than offenders who were in the TI or OTW groups.

At the end of the first year after release, 82 percent of PIECP participants were arrest-free. Offenders in the TI and OTW groups remained arrest-free at approximately the same rate (77 percent and 76 percent, respectively). By three years after release, however, the arrest-free rates for all three groups declined — 60 percent for the PIECP participants and 52 percent for offenders in both the TI and OTW programs.

Looking at conviction and reincarceration rates, the researchers found that 78 percent of PIECP participants were conviction-free during the follow-up periods of one year and three years, compared with 74 percent of the OTW group and 75 percent of the TI group. Ninety-three percent of PIECP participants remained incarceration-free during the follow-up periods, compared with 89 percent of the OTW participants and 90 percent of the TI group.

A Better Option

The research suggests that PIECP has been successful. Inmate PIECP wages benefit inmates, taxpayers, victims, families and states. PIECP participants also acquire post-release jobs more quickly, retain these jobs longer, and return to the criminal justice system less frequently and at a lower rate than inmates who worked in TI or engaged in OTW activities. These findings suggest that PIECP is an underutilized rehabilitation option and that additional efforts to increase the number of PIECP jobs could have an important impact on the nation's prison and jail populations.

FURTHER READING

Smith, C.J., J. Bechtel, A. Patrick, R.R. Smith and L. Wilson-Gentry. 2006. *Correctional industries preparing inmates for re-entry: Recidivism and post-release employment*, final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice (NCJ 214608). Washington, D.C.: NIJ. (June). Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/214608.pdf.

Petersik, T., T. Nayak and M.K. Foreman. 2003. *Identifying beneficiaries of PIE inmate incomes*, unpublished document for the National Correctional Industries Association. (July). Available at www.nationalcia.org/researchfullrpt.pdf.

ENDNOTES

¹ Moses, M.C. and C.J. Smith. 2007. Factories behind fences: Do prison 'real work' programs work? *NIJ Journal*, issue 257. Available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/jr000257.pdf. (June).

² With the exception of PIECP, U.S. jail and prison inmates are prohibited, under the Amhurst-Summers Act of 1935, from producing goods for sale in open interstate commercial markets. PIECP-certified programs are exempt from the \$10,000 limit on the sale of prisoner-made goods to the federal government.

³ The sample size included 6,464 inmates, with subjects nearly equally divided among groups. The sample included offenders released from 46 prisons in five states that implemented PIECP from Jan. 1, 1996, to June 30, 2001. The follow-up period began on the day the inmate was released and ranged from slightly less than two years to seven and a half years.

⁴ Technical violations were not considered new arrests.

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