

Study Examines Prisoners' Reentry Needs

By Christy Visher and Pamela Lattimore

Authors' Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

More than 97 percent of all U.S. prisoners are eventually released, and communities are annually absorbing nearly 650,000 individuals formerly incarcerated in prisons.¹ Their transition from life in prison to life in the community has profound implications. What is the federal government doing to help corrections officials begin reentry planning in prisons and actively carry it out in the community after prisoners are released?

One important effort, called the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), began funding programs in 2003. At the time, it was an unprecedented national response to the criminal justice, employment, education, health and housing challenges that adult and juvenile offenders face when they return to their communities. The effort was jointly funded by the U.S. departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services. SVORI supported reentry preparation at three key phases: 1) just prior to release from a prison or juvenile detention facility, 2) during the first few months post-release, and 3) for several years post-release as participants take on more productive and independent roles in the community. Eighty-nine SVORI programs operated in adult prisons, juvenile facilities and in communities around the country, offering such services as life-skills training, dental and medical services, needs and risk assessments, treatment and release plans, and job placement.

The Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice is funding an evaluation of the effectiveness of the SVORI efforts. The researchers released initial findings about the types of offenders in the program and their needs. These findings can help administrators prioritize the types of services that should be part of reentry planning.

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Prisoners Define Needs

One part of the evaluation involves interviews with incarcerated men, women and juveniles about what they think they will need after they are released. The researchers have analyzed the responses of adult male prisoners; analyses of female and juvenile responses are forthcoming. Men said their most vital needs were: education, general financial assistance, a driver's license, job training and employment.

Nearly three-quarters of the men in SVORI programs reported needing transportation assistance and better money-management skills. More than half said they needed the basics (food, clothing and a place to live), along with identification (birth certificate, Social Security card and photo ID card) and financial assistance. Men who had young children also reported a need for parenting classes and child care, help with child support payments, and help resolving custody issues. When asked what health services they needed upon release, three-quarters identified health insurance; more than half identified medical treatment; and more than a quarter said they needed mental health services. Many of the reported needs are intertwined. For example, when a former prisoner applies for medical insurance or treatment, he is also likely to need identification and possibly transportation. Interestingly, the majority of the men seemed to recognize some aspects of their own behavior that they need to change to improve their lives after they are released. Almost two-thirds reported needing to work on their personal relationships, and more than half said they needed a mentor and spiritual or religious assistance. One-third reported needing anger management training.

During the next two years, additional findings will be released. The evaluators are comparing SVORI participants with non-SVORI participants at three months, nine months and 15 months post-release to understand what impact the SVORI programs have. Drug tests conducted along with the interviews will help verify that what the individuals say in the interviews is both truthful and consistent. Additional analyses will examine recidivism and other outcomes at 12 and 24 months post-release.

Other Findings

The evaluators have determined that participants in SVORI programs are more likely to receive services than comparable nonparticipants. Most important, the evaluation indicates that from release through 15 months post-release SVORI participants appear to be doing well — moderately better than non-SVORI participants — across a wide range of outcomes. About one-third report living in their own residences. In contrast to preincarceration findings, few reported that they currently lived with people who abused alcohol or drugs. Nearly three-fourths have worked since release.

Continuing the Evaluation

In addition to conducting offender interviews and drug tests, the evaluators are collecting administrative data from criminal justice agencies. They are assembling data on employment, housing, family contact and stability, community involvement, physical and mental health, substance abuse, supervision compliance and technical violations, reoffending, rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration. The evaluators are also looking at neighborhood, work, family, peer relationships, education and military service as factors in reentry success.

Paving the Way to Successful Programs

The success of SVORI inspired the creation of the U.S. Department of Labor's Prisoner Reentry Initiative and led to the introduction of the Second Chance Act of 2007. This bill would reauthorize, with revisions, the U.S. Department of Justice's reentry program; provide money for state reentry programs; create a federal interagency task force on reentry; commission research projects; and authorize Department of Justice grants directly to nonprofit organizations to provide mentoring and transitional services to adult and juvenile offenders. This legislation is currently pending in Congress.

For more information on SVORI programs and the evaluation, visit www.svori-evaluation.org. To read highlights of the recent findings, see "Major Study Examines Prisoners and Their Reentry Needs," in the October 2007 *NIJ Journal*, No. 258, available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/258/reentry-needs.html.

ENDNOTE

¹ Council of State Governments, Re-Entry Policy Council. 2005. *Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council: Charting the safe and successful return of prisoners to the community*. New York: Council of State Governments. (January).

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