

‘CULTURAL SHIFT’ IS AMONG FINDINGS OF SECOND CHANCE ACT EVALUATION

BY **NANCY RITTER**

The first phase of an NIJ-funded evaluation finds that re-entry programs are moving toward a rehabilitative philosophy and an acceptance of evidence-based practices.



In the last three decades, the number of inmates released from the nation’s prisons each year increased fourfold. Recidivism rates continue to be alarmingly high.

To address this national dilemma, Congress passed the Second Chance Act (SCA) in 2008 to help criminal offenders successfully return to the community after they are released from prison or jail. Through the SCA, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has awarded more than \$250 million — through 300 grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations — to help medium- and high-risk adult and juvenile offenders successfully re-enter society and remain crime-free.

This fall, NIJ released a report on the first phase of a two-phase evaluation of demonstration sites funded under the SCA.¹ Called an “implementation evaluation,” this phase was an in-depth examination of

10 state and local government agencies from around the country that were among the first to receive SCA funding.

The findings of an implementation evaluation are important because they define the “it” in the second phase of the study that aims to answer the central question “Does it work?”

This question will be answered in the “outcome study,” which will examine the impact of the SCA on recidivism and determine the cost-effectiveness of the new re-entry programs. The outcome study will be completed in 2015.

A Social Imperative

Ron D’Amico, the principal investigator on the evaluation, cites significant — and straightforward — reasons why the nation’s ability to reintegrate prisoners has become a social policy imperative.

“We have huge numbers of people who have been incarcerated over the past few decades,” said D’Amico, a senior social scientist with Social Policy Research Associates.²

The numbers are, frankly, staggering:

- More than 1.6 million adults were in state and federal prisons in 2010.³
- 750,000 were in local jails in 2010.⁴

- More than 4.8 million were under community supervision in 2011.⁵
- 700,000 were released in 2011,⁶ four times the number released into the community 30 years ago.⁷

Within three years of release from jail or prison, two-thirds of offenders are rearrested and half are reincarcerated for a new crime or parole violation.⁸ In addition to the extraordinary burden this places on the nation’s correctional system, there is the stark reality of the individual lives behind the numbers. Half of offenders have not graduated from high school, and many have drug-abuse problems or mental or physical impairments.⁹ They face overwhelming challenges finding work and housing and reintegrating with their families.

Program Services Under the Second Chance Act

In addition to case management services, the 10 Second Chance Act sites evaluated by NIJ-funded researchers deliver re-entry services that fall into these basic categories:

Education and Training	GED preparation and testing; vocational and community college education
Employment Assistance	Job search and placement assistance; resume development; interviewing training
Substance Abuse Treatment	Intensive, outpatient, 12-step-type services, administered by a licensed specialist
Mental Health Services	Screenings; referrals; subsidized medication
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Psychotherapeutic approach that addresses dysfunctional emotions or maladaptive behaviors through goal-oriented, explicit systematic procedures
Pro-Social Services	Stress and anger management; peer support; leisure activities; family and parenting classes; mentoring
Housing Assistance	Subsidized housing; housing placement services

“And,” D’Amico noted, “they tend to be released into a relatively small number of urban neighborhoods that are fragile at best, characterized by high rates of poverty and other social problems.”¹⁰

The SCA, which passed with widespread bipartisan support, is the largest fiscal effort to date to try to turn the tide of these sobering realities.

Study Shows Three System Changes

One of the goals of the implementation evaluation is to determine whether the SCA demonstration grants can achieve fundamental, system-level changes. In the initial phase of the study, the researchers collected qualitative data on how the SCA-funded programs are being operated. The recently released findings from this first phase show three major system changes:

1. Partnerships are growing.
2. Services are becoming more “holistic.”
3. There is a cultural shift in thinking about how services are delivered.

“Although it is too early to tell if these changes will be long-lasting — or if they will extend to broader criminal justice and re-entry systems — the 10 sites definitely changed their business as usual under the SCA, creating practices worthy of continuing and emulating,” D’Amico said.

System Change #1: Partnerships Are Growing

Because state and local agencies and nonprofits often lack the capacity to deliver re-entry services by themselves, partnerships can be crucial. SCA funding has led to new partnerships, which are increasing the delivery of re-entry services.

Coordination between probation and parole departments and service providers has significantly improved. Case managers and parole officers are connecting with community groups that they did not know existed before SCA. Weak or limited partnerships that existed before SCA have been made stronger and more inclusive.

Within three years of release from jail or prison, two-thirds of offenders are rearrested and half are reincarcerated for a new crime or parole violation.

“With Second Chance funding, all of the stakeholders who have a role in ensuring the success of returning offenders are having more regular meetings where they are doing re-entry planning in a much more comprehensive way,” D’Amico said.

Of course, there were challenges in building these partnerships. Substantial ramp-up time was needed (sometimes one to two years) before partnerships operated smoothly. Case managers, particularly those who serve in a parole officer role, too, required training in needs-based services planning.

That said, the researchers found that partnerships in the 10 demonstration sites have improved as a result of SCA funding. And, although it cannot be known whether important features, such as frequent all-stakeholder services-planning meetings, will continue when funding ends, D’Amico said there are clear indications that some project components are likely to continue.

System Change #2: Services Are Becoming More “Holistic”

The researchers found five significant improvements in the delivery of re-entry services in the 10 SCA demonstration sites:

1. There is greater continuity of services from pre-release to post-release.

2. Staff members are better prepared to work with offenders.
3. Assessments are being used well for services planning.
4. There is more time for case management.
5. More re-entry services are available.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of case manager. When offenders are released into the community, they must meet specific conditions of parole, including reporting once a month (or with whatever frequency the state requires) to their parole officer. This means that, historically, most parole officers handled hundreds of cases, leaving them with little time to focus on anything other than whether offenders are complying with their conditions of parole. But, with SCA funding, some sites provided special change-management training to parole officers, allowing them to assume more of a case manager role. Other sites brought in case managers from municipal departments and nonprofits.

“Although their titles differ from site to site — re-entry specialist in one, enhanced parole agent in another — there’s no doubt that case management was perceived as a critical, value-added feature in all of the sites,” D’Amico said.

After the case managers perform an assessment, which considers risks, needs, goals, strengths and barriers, they broker re-entry services in the community. Of course, assessments, per se, are not new, but the research found that SCA funding is enabling case managers to think more holistically. Essentially, D’Amico said, case managers function as mentors, enforcers and brokers of the services that each offender needs to successfully re-enter the community (see sidebar, “Program Services Under the Second Chance Act”).

This is not to suggest that adding the role of case manager was smooth sailing. Yes, blending the roles of case manager and parole officer helped head off turf wars and also increased offender participation in programs, because offenders knew that they

could face reincarceration if they did not show up for appointments and service assistance. But there were downsides, too.

“Some offenders had perceptions of parole officers, who then took on the role of case manager, that negatively affected their ability to take full advantage of SCA services,” D’Amico explained.

But facing these challenges also helped prompt a cultural shift among corrections professionals that D’Amico characterized as “very exciting.”

System Change #3: A Cultural Shift in the Re-Entry Mindset

Perhaps the most heartening observation the researchers made in their evaluation of the 10 demonstration sites to date concerns a true “cultural shift” — from a focus on simply enforcing re-entry rules and regulations to a rehabilitative philosophy and an acceptance of evidence-based practices. Put simply, many of the case managers and parole officers reported that they are approaching their jobs in new ways.

“One administrator said that Second Chance completely changed the way his agency thinks about re-entry planning,” D’Amico said. “He pointed to a new mindset throughout the organization regarding what is needed to help offenders be successful after they are released.”

The evaluation report discusses some of the long-standing cynicism and skepticism that case managers — particularly those who come from a corrections background — are overcoming through better communication, planning and training. It would be hard to overstate the strain that corrections facilities have historically faced: inadequate funding to support staff members who operate under extremely heavy workloads with a complicated population.

“In the past, corrections professionals have been constrained with what they are able to do with available funds, and also how they perceive their mission,” said D’Amico. With the aid of SCA

funding, these institutional challenges could be overcome as corrections agencies began to focus less on compliance and monitoring and more on a holistic, rehabilitative philosophy that identifies what each offender needs to successfully return to the community.

One of the lessons learned in the evaluation to date is that this type of cultural shift is not easy. It is not a transformation that happens quickly. Training staff takes time, and challenges remain.

“This cultural shift is far from complete,” D’Amico said, noting that permanent changes in systemwide structures and policies are difficult to point to at this stage of the evaluation.

“Nonetheless,” he added, “this transformation is an important one that will likely last well past the end of any formal funding.”

Among the lessons learned to date:

- Projects need substantial ramp-up time.
- Identifying and training case managers are crucial steps.
- Re-entry success could be improved if there were more housing and mental health service providers.
- Women require different assessment methods and re-entry services than men.
- Preventing staff turnover must be a high priority.

Next Step: Outcome Study

The goals set by the Bureau of Justice Assistance when it issued the competitive solicitations for SCA funding were significant: increased employment, education and housing opportunities; increased payment of child support; and a 50 percent reduction in recidivism within 12 months of release. These types of outcomes will be measured in the outcome phase of the evaluation.

Data collection on 1,000 offenders in seven of the 10 sites will continue through the fall of 2014. Then, using a random assignment design, the researchers

will compare offenders who received SCA services to those who did not to determine whether the outcomes achieved under the SCA are different than they would have been without the law and funding.¹¹

There are substantial obstacles to successful re-entry after incarceration. On the individual level, they include poor social skills, low levels of education, the lingering effects of trauma, poor work history, weak or nonexistent support networks, and a lack of willingness to embrace the sorts of changes that, frankly, are necessary to turn one’s life around. On the community and societal levels, barriers include economic downturns, community prejudice and a changing policy landscape.

And it seems to go without saying that none of these challenges is likely to diminish in the foreseeable future. As other states join California in realignment — shifting prison populations to jails and community supervision — these challenges will, in fact, be compounded by the sheer number of offenders who will need to be reintegrated into the community.

“This makes it more important than ever to determine the outcomes of the SCA re-entry programming,” said Marie Garcia, program officer for NIJ’s re-entry portfolio.

“The challenges surrounding a successful re-entry to society after incarceration are enormous,” she added. “Quite simply, this is increasingly becoming everyone’s problem.”

About the Author

Nancy Ritter is a writer and editor at NIJ.

For More Information

- To read the full report, *Evaluation of the Second Chance Act (SCA) Adult Demonstration 2009 Grantees: Interim Report*, visit NCJRS.gov, keyword 243294.

- Watch a video of Ron D'Amico talking about recent findings in the first phase of the SCA evaluation at NJ.gov, keyword: D'Amico.

Notes

1. Of the total SCA funding, \$55 million was in the form of demonstration grants to more than 100 state, local and tribal governments to plan and implement re-entry strategies; the 10 sites in the NJ evaluation were selected from these.
2. D'Amico's Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) colleagues are Christian Geckeler, Jennifer Henderson-Frakes, Deborah Kogan and Tyler Moazed. SPR partnered with MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, and the National Opinion Research Center in the evaluation.
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5. Glaze, Lauren E., and Erika Parks, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2011*, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, November 2012, NCJ 239972.
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9. Petersilia, Joan, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; Ditton, Paula M., *Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers*, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, July 1999, NCJ 174463; Hammett, Theodore M., Cheryl Roberts, and Sofia Kennedy, "Health-Related Issues in Prisoner Reentry," *Crime and Delinquency* 47 (July 2001): 390-409.

10. Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul, *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2001; LaVigne, Nancy G., and Vera Kachnowski, *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Maryland*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2003.

11. Random assignment is a key feature of scientific experiments. By randomly assigning subjects to either the experimental group or the control group, researchers are able to draw definitive conclusions about the distinctive contribution of the intervention to achieving the desired outcomes. A practitioner-friendly explanation of randomized control trials and related issues regarding program evaluation can be found at https://www.bja.gov/evaluation/reference/Quality_Outcome_Eval.pdf.

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