

# NIJ Study of Second Chance Act Finds “Cultural Shift” Among Probation and Parole Officers

By Nancy Ritter

**Author’s Note:** Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Researchers funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) have found what they are calling a “cultural shift” among probation and parole officers in some of the Second Chance Act (SCA) demonstration sites that they are evaluating. Congress passed the SCA with widespread bipartisan support in 2008 to help criminal offenders successfully return to the community after they are released from prison or jail.<sup>1</sup> The NIJ-funded evaluation of 10 demonstration sites — which were among the first to receive SCA funding — was released in fall 2013.<sup>2</sup>

“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 Ron D’Amico, Ph.D., a senior social scientist with Social Policy Research Associates and the lead researcher on the study.<sup>3</sup> “What we saw in some SCA sites, however, is that agencies were beginning 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.” The findings from this first phase of the study (called an “implementation evaluation”) are important because they define the “it” in the second phase of the study (called an “outcome evaluation”) — as in, “Does it work?”

## Three Observed System Changes

One of the goals of the NIJ-funded evaluation is to determine whether the SCA demonstration grants are helping to achieve fundamental, system-level changes. To date, the findings have revealed three major system changes:

- Partnerships are growing;
- Services are becoming more “holistic;” and
- There is a cultural shift in the thinking about how services are delivered.

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

**Partnerships are growing.** The researchers found that new partnerships had been developed, increasing the delivery of reentry services. Coordination between probation and parole departments and service providers had significantly improved — and case managers and parole officers were connecting with community groups that, before SCA, they did not know existed.

This is not to say that there have not been challenges. Substantial ramp-up time (sometimes one to two years) was needed for partnerships to operate smoothly. It took time to learn about procedure changes and revise operations accordingly to get things off the ground. Also, case managers — particularly those who also served in the role of parole officer — required training in needs-based services planning.

**Services are becoming more “holistic.”** The researchers found five significant improvements in the delivery of reentry services in the 10 SCA demonstration sites:

- Greater continuity of services from prerelease to post-release;
- Better-prepared staff to work with offenders;
- Better use of assessments in services planning;
- More reentry services delivered; and
- More time for case management.

One of the most significant findings concerns the last item: the role of the case manager. Some of the demonstration sites used SCA funding to train parole officers in change management, which helped them take on more of a case manager role; other sites brought

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in case managers from municipal departments and nonprofits. “Although their titles differ from site to site — reentry 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.

Essentially, the case managers functioned as mentors, enforcers and brokers of the services that each offender needed to be successful in reentering the community. These services include employment assistance, education and training, substance-abuse treatment, mental-health services, cognitive-behavioral therapy and housing assistance. This is not to suggest that adding the role of case manager was easy. On one hand, blending the roles of case management and parole officer helped increase offender participation in programs, because the offenders faced the possibility of reincarceration if they did not show up for appointments and service assistance. On the other hand, however, some offenders had difficulty taking full advantage of SCA reentry services because of their negative perceptions of parole officers who then also took on the role of case manager.

**A cultural shift in the reentry mindset.** Perhaps the most heartening observation made by the researchers is what they regarded as a “cultural shift” among corrections staff — from a focus on simply enforcing reentry rules and regulations to a rehabilitative philosophy and an acceptance of evidence-based practices. The evaluation report discusses some of the long-standing cynicism and skepticism that case managers — particularly those who came from a corrections background — are overcoming through better communication, planning and training. This, in turn, is leading to a shift in how corrections professionals perceive their mission: a decreasing focus on compliance and monitoring and an increasing focus on what the researchers call a “holistic” rehabilitative philosophy.

A cultural shift like this does not happen quickly — and, as researchers noted, it is far from complete. “Nonetheless,” D’Amico said, “this transformation is an important one that will likely last well past the end of any formal funding.” The following lessons learned were discussed in the implementation evaluation:

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

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### Next Step: Outcome Study

When the Bureau of Justice Assistance issued competitive solicitations for SCA funding, it set significant goals: increased employment, education and housing opportunities; increased payment of child support; and a 50-percent reduction in recidivism (within 12 months of release). It is these outcomes — including the cost-effectiveness of the new reentry programs — that the NIJ-funded researchers are examining in the second phase of the study.

Currently, data is being collected on 1,000 offenders in seven of the 10 demonstration sites. Then, using

a random assignment design, the researchers will compare offenders who received SCA services to those who did not to determine if the outcomes achieved under the SCA are different than they would have been without the law and funding.<sup>4</sup> Those findings are expected to be released in 2015.

To date, however, the researchers say they are heartened by the movement toward a more rehabilitative philosophy and an acceptance of evidence-based practices. In the face of the increase in the number of inmates released every year from U.S. prisons during the last three decades, this can only be regarded as promising news.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 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 reenter society and remain crime-free. Of the \$250 million, \$55 million funded demonstration grants in more than 100 state, local and tribal governments to plan and implement reentry strategies. The 10 sites in the NIJ evaluation were selected from these.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, the full report, *Evaluation of the Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration 2009 Grantees: Interim Report*, is available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/243294.pdf>. To watch a video of Ron D’Amico talking about recent findings in the first phase of the SCA evaluation, visit <http://nij.ncjrs.gov/multimedia/video-damico.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> D’Amico’s Social Policy Research (SPR) colleagues are Christian Geckeler, Jennifer Henderson-Frakes, Deborah Kogan and Tyler Moazed. In the evaluation, SPR partnered with the National Opinion Research Center and MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization.

<sup>4</sup> Random assignment is a key feature of scientific experiments. By randomly assigning subjects to either the experimental 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](https://www.bja.gov/evaluation/reference/Quality_Outcome_Eval.pdf).

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