

# NIJ-FUNDED RESEARCH EXAMINES WHAT WORKS FOR SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

BY BLAIR AMES

**A**cross the country, more than 600,000 Americans are released from prisons and jails every year, and more than 4.5 million are serving a community supervision sentence.<sup>1</sup> For these individuals, transitioning back to their communities following incarceration can be a challenge for a number of reasons.

Often, when individuals are released, they face several critical barriers to successful reentry that they will need to overcome. Some have substance abuse issues, others have no place to live, and a criminal record makes it difficult for many to find a job. For most, it is only a matter of time before they return to prison. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 68% of state prisoners are rearrested within three years of their release.<sup>2</sup>

The role of community corrections practitioners and reentry service providers is to ensure that these individuals do not commit additional crimes and that they gain the skills needed to fully reintegrate into the community. To support individuals returning from prison and jail, communities across the country provide programming — such as education, employment, housing, and other supportive measures — to help offenders reintegrate. But studying these programs, and identifying the most productive aspects of each that can be replicated in other communities, is a complicated task.

“Every individual has unique needs when they return to the community. Similarly, the communities to which they return have specific needs they are able to address,” said Marie Garcia, special assistant to the NIJ director. “The intersection of these two could present challenges with regard to addressing individual needs and identifying what makes a program successful.”



## NIJ-supported research over the past 50 years has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all model for successful reentry.

For the past 50 years, NIJ has fostered rigorous research on recidivism and reentry. In fact, the term “reentry” gained popularity in 1999 after it was adopted by then-NIJ Director Jeremy Travis and others to describe the growing field of social services and rehabilitative supports for people returning from incarceration.

NIJ-supported research has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all model for successful reentry. However, NIJ-supported researchers have evaluated reentry programs with effective and ineffective attributes, and these studies have identified some efforts that could actually be counterproductive.

NIJ continues to support the evaluation of issues related to reentry, such as statewide initiatives and research that examines the process of reentering society within the context of the communities and families to which former offenders return. Some of NIJ’s most significant investments in reentry include evaluations of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) and the Second Chance Act, which sought to improve reentry outcomes. Both have provided valuable insight into effective strategies surrounding reentry.

### SVORI and the Second Chance Act

To reduce the \$40 billion spent by state governments annually for corrections without compromising public safety, it is critical to identify programs and services that improve outcomes for released prisoners.

Since 2004, NIJ has undertaken expansive reviews of two federal reentry initiatives — SVORI and the Second Chance Act.

SVORI was a collaborative federal effort implemented in 2002 to improve reentry outcomes in five areas: criminal justice, employment, education, health, and housing. A total of 89 SVORI programs operated in adult prisons, juvenile facilities, and communities around the country. Programs offered services such as life skills training, dental and medical care, needs and risk assessments, treatment and release plans, and job placement.

A multisite, multiyear, NIJ-supported quasi-experimental design evaluation of SVORI in 2010 found that there was greater access to programs and services for adults leaving prison. However, these programs showed no impact on the rates of rearrest and reincarceration for adult men and no significant impact on reincarceration for adult women.<sup>3</sup>

Later analysis found more promising results.<sup>4</sup> In a longer-term follow-up study in 2012, NIJ-supported researchers found that participation in SVORI programs was associated with longer times to rearrest and fewer arrests in general. Specifically, services oriented toward individual change — such as substance abuse treatment, cognitive-focused programs, and education — were found to have modest beneficial effects.

However, services aimed at practical needs — including reentry preparation, life skills programs, and employment services — did not improve postrelease outcomes for men. In some cases, these services appeared to be detrimental to their successful reintegration.

For women, SVORI services led to more positive outcomes in the areas of employment and substance abuse compared with non-SVORI women, but there were no significant differences in outcomes related to housing, recidivism, family and peer relationships, or physical and mental health.

Although SVORI programming had only modest benefits for participants, the evaluation was able to identify programs that could be detrimental to individuals’ reentry success.

## Reentry Court Evaluation

Through NIJ's comprehensive evaluation of Second Chance Act programs, Northwest Professional Consortium, Inc., completed an evaluation of eight sites that had received Second Chance Act funding. Among the sites evaluated, some used funding to expand their reentry court programs, while others established new reentry courts.<sup>1</sup>

Of the eight reentry courts evaluated, all but one became fully operational. At the end of the evaluation period, six appeared to have positive prospects for sustaining their programs after the grant funding. A key lesson learned, based on the experience of grantees, was the importance of having team members who were committed to the success of clients and who believed in the reentry court model. Numerous stakeholders across the evaluated sites identified commitment to the reentry court philosophy and its participants as central to successfully implementing a program, especially among decision-makers such as judges and supervision officers.

The prospects of reducing recidivism, however, were not as positive. Overall, reentry court participants were found to have greater access to services along with higher accountability and supervision. Yet only one of the courts showed that program participants were less likely to be rearrested, reconvicted, and reincarcerated. At other sites, participants were significantly more likely to be reincarcerated, which indicates that the use of jail as a sanction for noncompliance may not be an effective use of resources.

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### Note

1. Christine Lindquist, Lama Hassoun Ayoub, and Shannon M. Carey, "The National Institute of Justice's Evaluation of Second Chance Act Adult Reentry Courts: Lessons Learned about Reentry Court Program Implementation and Sustainability," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2010-RY-BX-0001, January 2018, NCJ 251495, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251495.pdf>.

"It's just as important to know something doesn't work so that we don't keep going down that road and developing more programs that have not proven to be effective. I think that's why we need replication research," said Angela Moore, senior science advisor and social scientist at NIJ.

Building on the positive findings from the follow-up analysis of SVORI, NIJ recently completed three multisite, multiyear evaluations of the impact of the Second Chance Act on recidivism (see sidebar, "Reentry Court Evaluation").

The Second Chance Act, signed into law in 2008, was intended to increase reentry programming and improve outcomes for former offenders returning to

their families and communities. The Second Chance Act awarded federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programs, mentoring, victim support, and other services to individuals reentering society. As with SVORI, NIJ-funded evaluations found that the programs offered through the Second Chance Act have brought about positive change.

Most importantly, two NIJ-supported randomized controlled trial evaluations led by Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) and RTI International found that the Second Chance Act significantly increased participants' access to reentry services.<sup>5</sup> However, in

## Developing a New Risk Assessment Tool: Implementing a Key Feature of the First Step Act

An offender's release from prison is an important step toward a crime-free and productive life. Communities are safer when correctional facilities do a better job of rehabilitating offenders in custody and preparing them for a successful transition to life after incarceration.

The First Step Act (FSA), signed into law in December 2018, aims to reduce recidivism and reform the federal prison system. A critical component of the law is the development of a risk and needs assessment system for the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

Risk and needs assessment tools can provide important information across varying decision points in the criminal justice system. As required by the FSA, it is critical that the risk tool used by BOP employs static and dynamic factors that inform the provision of programming and treatment referrals and help predict the likelihood of recidivism and serious misconduct.

Under the FSA, NIJ supported the development of a new risk assessment system. NIJ contracted with outside experts to develop the Prisoner Assessment Tool Targeting Estimated Risk and Needs (PATTERN), a significant advancement in the Justice Department's implementation of the FSA.

PATTERN is an assessment designed to predict the likelihood of general and violent recidivism for all inmates over a three-year follow-up period. PATTERN achieves a high level of predictive performance and surpasses what is commonly found for risk assessment tools for correctional populations in the United States.

PATTERN is an important step forward in the Department's goal of fully implementing the FSA. NIJ remains committed to working with its federal partners to implement additional key features of the statute.

general, participation in these programs did not affect a range of reentry outcomes, such as the likelihood of recidivism, substance abuse, and compliance with supervision.

The SPR evaluation analyzed seven reentry programs, including 966 individuals receiving services through the Second Chance Act.<sup>6</sup> Second Chance funds were important in expanding the seven grantees' capacity for reentry services, and those receiving services were significantly more likely to have a reentry plan and a case manager whom they trusted. At the end of 30 months, individuals in Second Chance Act programs had better long-term employment and earnings but

were no less likely to be rearrested, reconvicted, or reincarcerated.

### Moving Forward

The hurdles to successful community supervision and reentry can be daunting. Given the public safety and fiscal implications of an individual's success in reintegration, it is critical that community leaders and correctional stakeholders know which initiatives are the most effective.

To further support the development of knowledge about what leads to successful offender reentry,

NIJ is engaged in the work of the newly created Federal Interagency Council on Crime Prevention and Improving Reentry (or Reentry Council). Composed of more than a dozen federal entities, the Reentry Council has a unique opportunity to implement strategies aimed at preventing crime, improving reentry for American youth and adults, and encouraging prison reform across the nation. In April 2018, the attorney general appointed NIJ Director David B. Muhlhausen to serve as the executive director of the Reentry Council. In this new role, NIJ can infuse the work of the Reentry Council with science about what works in offender reentry and continue to build important collaborations across the federal government. (See sidebar, “Developing a New Risk Assessment Tool: Implementing a Key Feature of the First Step Act.”)

Further supporting NIJ’s role in using science to better understand what makes reentry programming successful, a new NIJ initiative will promote the rigorous examination of other promising reentry strategies, initiatives, and programs. Specifically, NIJ is interested in evaluating programs aimed at adults and young adults with a moderate to high risk of reoffending.

Garcia described this effort as “a call to the field to be thoughtful and innovative about offender reentry.”

“We know a lot about the challenges that we face — implementing programs, ensuring that services match offender needs, and the myriad of other issues that arise when providing services to a high-need population that likely come from under-resourced communities,” she said. “Knowing what we know, we need to do better. This is the field’s chance to do just that.”

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## About the Author

**Blair Ames** is a digital journalist and contractor with Leidos.

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## Notes

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2. Mariel Alper, Matthew R. Durose, and Joshua Markman, *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005-2014)*, Special Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2018, NCJ 250975, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>.
3. Pamela K. Lattimore and Christy A. Visher, “The Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI: Summary and Synthesis,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2004-RE-CX-0002, April 2010, NCJ 230421, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230421.pdf>.
4. Pamela K. Lattimore et al., “Prisoner Reentry Services: What Worked for SVORI Evaluation Participants?” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2009-IJ-CX-0010, April 2012, NCJ 238214, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238214.pdf>.
5. Christine Lindquist et al., “Cross-Site Evaluation of the Bureau of Justice Assistance FY 2011 Second Chance Act Adult Offender Reentry Demonstration Projects: Final Report,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2012-RY-BX-0001, May 2018, NCJ 251703, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251703.pdf>.
6. Ronald D’Amico and Hui Kim, “Evaluation of Seven Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration Programs: Impact Findings at 30 Months,” grant number 2010-RY-BX-0003, May 2018, NCJ 251702, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251702.pdf>.

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