The Multi-site Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative

Enrollment Issues among SVORI Programs—UPDATE

By Christine Lindquist (*RTI International*), Susan Brumbaugh (*RTI International*), Pamela K. Lattimore   March 2008
(*RTI International*), and Laura Winterfield, *Urban Institute*

In 2003, the US DOJ, DOL, ED, DHUD, and DHHS funded 69 grantees to implement reentry programs for prisoners. The SVORI funding supported 89 programs nationwide, which are being evaluated by RTI International and the Urban Institute.

In this Reentry Research in Action brief, we describe enrollment issues in the SVORI programs, including differences between expected and actual enrollment and enrollment barriers encountered. Findings are based on data gathered from surveys of the SVORI program directors conducted in 2005 and 2006.

As policy makers work toward developing or sustaining prisoner reentry initiatives, an important consideration is the number of individuals to be served by such programs. Given fixed budgets, this consideration involves a tradeoff between the level of services that can be provided and the number of participants that can be served. In addition, meeting enrollment targets requires planning and the management of organizational issues. Using information from the 2005 and 2006 surveys of SVORI program directors (PDs), this brief summarizes issues surrounding enrollment in SVORI programs and is an update of an earlier brief on the same topic that used information from the 2005 PD survey only. Enrollment and other program implementation issues are also explored in Lattimore et al. (2005) and Visher et al. (2007).[1,2]

A June 2005 survey of all 89 SVORI PDs[3] showed that the SVORI programs were small and served fewer participants than the sites initially projected. Total cumulative enrollment reported in the 2005 and 2006 surveys is shown in Exhibit 1. In 2005, 60% of the programs had enrolled 100 or fewer participants, and 37% of the programs had enrolled 50 or fewer participants. The 2006 survey, which was completed by 86 PDs in March 2006, demonstrated an increase in enrollment between 2005 and 2006. Despite this increase in the number of participants served, 44% of the PDs indicated in the 2006 survey that their total cumulative enrollment to date was lower than their original projections for program size.

Exhibit 1. Total Cumulative SVORI Enrollment in 2005 and 2006
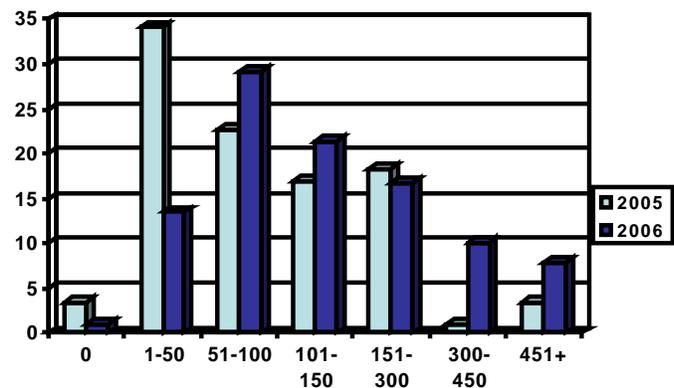
Interestingly, although juvenile programs tended to be smaller than adult programs in both 2005 and 2006, it appears that this small program size was intentional for many juvenile programs. For example, although 49% of juvenile programs had enrolled 100 or fewer participants in 2006 while 35% of adult programs enrolled 100 or fewer participants (an improvement over the 2005 figures—72% of juvenile programs and 50% of adult programs—yet still an indication of small program size), directors of juvenile programs were more likely in both

[1] Lattimore, P.K., C.A. Visher, L. Winterfield, C. Lindquist, and S. Brumbaugh (2005). "Implementation of Prisoner Reentry Programs: Findings from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative Multi-Site Evaluation." *Justice Research and Policy,* 7(2):87-109.

[2] Visher, C., C.H. Lindquist, and S.M. Brumbaugh (2007). "Lessons Learned from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative: Program Director Perspectives on Implementing Reentry Programming." *Corrections Today*, 69(2):92-97.

[3] The 69 SVORI grantees are operating a total of 89 distinct programs, 39 which serve juvenile populations and 50 which serve adult populations (or a combination of both adults and juveniles). The multi-site evaluation describes characteristics at the program level rather than the grantee level.

years to indicate that their enrollment numbers were about the same or more than what the program originally projected. Across both adult and juvenile programs, small SVORI enrollments were realized even though three-quarters (75%) of PDs reported that the grantee agency set an enrollment target for the program and that the agency monitored progress toward this target. This finding suggests that, for many adult programs in particular, the small program size was not by design and occurred despite enrollment targets being established.

To understand the factors that contributed to generally low enrollment in these reentry programs, we examined the factors related to program entry. These factors included programs' establishment of their eligibility criteria (based on some federal requirements), development of an approach to identify offenders who meet the established eligibility criteria, and actual enrollment of the eligible offenders. In some programs, site-specific approaches for recruitment and programming involved additional steps before final enrollment, such as obtaining agreement for participation (in programs established as voluntary) or transferring participants to selected facilities for programming. Throughout the steps involved in identifying and enrolling SVORI participants, programs encountered operational barriers. We explored these barriers in detail in both the 2005 and 2006 PD surveys.

As shown in Exhibit 2, the most consistently reported barrier to enrollment was restrictive eligibility criteria. In the 2005 survey, 31% of PDs agreed or strongly agreed that their program's stringent eligibility criteria limited the number of individuals they were able to enroll. In the 2006 survey, PDs were asked to rank (among the factors included in Exhibit 2) the three most significant factors that limited enrollment. The top-ranked barrier (reported by 19% of PDs) was the program's restrictive eligibility criteria. Unlike the 2005 survey, the 2006 survey also asked PDs about the role of eligibility criteria established by the federal funding agency, with 17% of PDs ranking this factor as the most significant issue that limited enrollment. Other structural issues frequently attributed to enrollment problems in 2005 and 2006 were offenders being identified too late to

Exhibit 2. Barriers to Enrollment	Percentage reporting issue as barrier in 2005	Percentage ranking issue as top barrier in 2006
Restrictive program eligibility criteria	31%	19%
Restrictive funding agency eligibility criteria	—	17%
Offenders being identified too late	31%	9%
Inaccurate/unavailable release dates	30%	11%
Eligible offenders declining participation	30%	11%
Post-release plans for offenders unavailable	27%	1%
Facility/agency policies make programming difficult	25%	11%
Not enough potential participants screened	24%	5%
MIS difficult to use/hard to access	19%	1%
Difficulty getting information from facilities	18%	—
Insufficient resources to serve those eligible	18%	3%
MIS insufficient for determining eligibility	17%	3%
Few referrals from facility staff	12%	1%

Note: The 2005 column reflects the percentage of program directors who agreed or strongly agreed that the issue was a barrier to enrollment; the 2006 column reflects the percentage of program directors who ranked the issue as the most significant factor that limited enrollment.

MIS = Management information system.

complete programming, the lack of availability of accurate release-date information, the lack of availability of post-release plans, and facility or agency policies that made programming difficult. Finally, it was apparent that the voluntary nature of many programs (note that two-thirds are voluntary) may be at least partially responsible for lower-than-expected enrollment.

Some interesting differences in enrollment barriers experienced by adult and juvenile programs emerged in our examination of the data. The lack of availability of accurate release-date information appeared particularly problematic for juvenile programs. This factor emerged as the top barrier for juvenile programs in both 2005 and 2006, but only the seventh most frequently reported barrier for adult programs in both years. This pattern may be due to juveniles being more likely to have indeterminate sentences, which makes it more difficult for juvenile programs to identify individuals who are eligible for enrollment because many reentry programs use projected release date to determine the appropriate point of program entry for potential participants. For adult programs, restrictive eligibility criteria established by the programs (and, as measured in the 2006 survey, the federal funding agencies) and eligible offenders declining to participate were the most frequently reported barriers.

Although several juvenile programs did rank restrictive eligibility criteria as the most significant enrollment barrier in 2006, very few juvenile programs reported difficulties with eligible offenders declining to participate. This finding is almost certainly due to fewer juvenile programs being voluntary for eligible offenders (51% of juvenile programs and 80% of adult programs were established as voluntary).

The enrollment barriers commonly reported by PDs suggest that agencies encountered structural problems once they attempted to identify potential SVORI participants. The overall finding that stringent eligibility criteria were the most significant barriers to program enrollment was somewhat perplexing, however, for two reasons. First, there were few federal eligibility requirements for grantees—offenders had to be aged 35 or younger, subject to post-release supervision, and considered serious or violent—and exemptions to these requirements could be obtained. Second, most programs appeared to employ relatively broad eligibility criteria with respect to offender characteristics. For example, as we have described elsewhere (Lattimore et al. [2004][4]), most SVORI programs served the general "serious and violent" offender population rather than basing eligibility on offense type, targeting populations with specific service needs (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness), or excluding particular subgroups (e.g., sex offenders or prisoners who are severely mentally ill). Programs did, however, tend to concentrate their SVORI programmatic activities in selected pre-release facilities or among prisoners returning to selected communities upon release, essentially applying geographic eligibility criteria (e.g., pre-release facility, post-release county of residence) in identifying program participants. Although logistically advantageous, this strategy is likely to have had the unintended consequence of limiting the number of "eligible" program participants.

The SVORI programs' identification of specific operational issues that hindered attempts to meet enrollment targets can provide a lesson to other agencies considering new or expanded prisoner reentry programming. Although most grantees included large segments of their incarcerated populations as eligible for their SVORI programs, enrollment for most programs was lower than intended, particularly for adult programs. These findings suggest that, during the planning stages, agencies should carefully evaluate operational and structural issues related to enrollment—including information systems and potential screening processes, as well as incompatible policies regarding inmate movement, security, and releases—in addition to addressing more traditional considerations, such as staffing and service provision.

> Lack of information, such as release dates or post-release plans, hinders enrollment because it precludes the timely identification of potentially eligible program participants. Not knowing whether a participant was going to be released was also identified as particularly problematic. A few PDs noted that the reluctance of the parole board to grant parole was an ongoing issue.

Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI Principal Investigators

Pamela K. Lattimore, Ph.D.
RTI International
Center for Crime, Violence, and Justice Research
3040 Cornwallis Road
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709
Phone: 803-754-5965
Fax: 919-485-7700

Christy A. Visher, Ph.D.
Urban Institute
Justice Policy Center
2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: 202-261-5593
Fax: 202-659-8985

www.svori-evaluation.org

[4] Lattimore, P.K., S. Brumbaugh, C. Visher, C.H. Lindquist, L. Winterfield, M. Salas, and J. Zweig. (2004). "National Portrait of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative." Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. RTI Report 8805.