

Executive Summary

Situation Analysis and Purpose of Study

Across the United States, and especially in California, officials are struggling with the challenge of high recidivism rates among parolees. In California, which has the country's largest incarcerated population, 70 percent of released prisoners recidivate and are returned to prison within two years. California is putting greater emphasis on prisoner re-entry and rehabilitation programs and has publicly called for an investment in prisoner re-entry strategies.

This report was commissioned as part of an evaluation of the Prisoner Re-entry Employment Program (PREP) supported by a grant from the California Endowment. Second Chance, the San Diego-based nonprofit that was the recipient of this funding, chose the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at California State University San Marcos (SBRI) to evaluate program counts and outcomes and generate publishable results of best practices.

PREP Background

Second Chance, a nonprofit dedicated to providing a second chance to homeless men and women, began PREP in 2003. PREP seeks to reduce recidivism by providing job readiness training, transitional sober living, mental health services and case management to parolees immediately upon their release.

The two-year program includes:

1. Pre-Release orientation,
2. Gate pick-up for prisoners released from jail or prison,
3. Immediate transportation to a sober living transitional housing placement,
4. A three-week job readiness training course (STRIVE – see below),
5. Job search, and job-placement assistance, and
6. Mental health counseling and case management services over two years.

The job readiness program builds on the core mission of Second Chance. Since 1998, they have offered the nationally-recognized Support and Training Resulting in Valuable Employees (STRIVE) program for job readiness training to any person interested in the intensive three-week, tough-love approach to preparing for and keeping a job.

Key Findings

PREP Reduces Recidivism. The study found that ex-offenders who graduated from the PREP program were significantly less likely to return to prison (recidivate) than ex-offenders who did not participate in PREP.

In broad terms, about 30 percent of PREP graduates recidivated within two years, compared to nearly 70 percent for those who did not participate in PREP. The recidivism rate of the study's control group (non-PREP participants) matched the overall recidivism rate of California parolees.

PREP Increases Confidence/Motivation among Parolees. The percentage of participants who felt that "they were very or extremely prepared to find a job" more than doubled over the course of the program.

PREP Reduces Depression among Parolees. The percentage of PREP clients with clinical levels of depression was reduced by more than 50 percent.

Methodology

A total of 2,565 parolees took part in this study, which included a control group of parolees who did not participate in PREP.

SBRI and Second Chance did not choose to pursue a randomized experiment because it would mean knowingly depriving people of the services Second Chance provided. However, randomization was accomplished by the calendar of job readiness classes. If the release date was less than 11 days prior to the next class, they were assigned to the treatment group and received the PREP program. If the release date was 11 days or more prior to the start of the next class, the person was assigned to the control group.

Concluding Observations

Based on the empirical data and cumulative results of this three-year study, Second Chance has developed a program that reduces recidivism. While the average starting wage for PREP graduates of \$10.41 per hour is significantly below the average personal income for the region (\$16.53 per hour), it is well above California's minimum wage of \$6.75 per hour. Further, the employment-placement rate for PREP participants surpassed 80 percent.

To gain employment, previously incarcerated people must overcome significant obstacles such as the social stigma associated with being an ex-convict. Many are also wrestling with their own demons, including drug/alcohol abuse and mental health issues. The data shows that Second Chance equips ex-offenders with the tools, attitude and motivation necessary to overcome these obstacles and become productive members of society.