

**Correctional Programs in the  
Age of Mass Incarceration:  
What Do We Know About “What Works”**

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## **Correctional Programs in the Age of Mass Incarceration: What Do We Know About “What Works”**

### **THE AGE OF MASS INCARCERATION**

Beginning in the mid-1970s the convergence of several social and economic forces changed the size, face, and nature of the U.S. penal system. In terms of the size of the penal system, changes in criminal justice policies associated with the wars on drugs and crime mean that more convictions now lead to a prison sentence than in the past, as well as prison sentences that tend to be of longer duration than in the past. The overall result of these policy shifts is a rising penal population. As of June 2006 there were 1.5 million prisoners held in our federal and state prisons compared to 329,000 in 1980, more than a four-fold increase (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006).<sup>1</sup> In terms of imprisonment rates, the U.S. is the world's leader. In 2005 out of every 100,000 U.S. citizens, 705 were in jail or prison, a 500 percent increase over the last thirty years, and a rate that is higher than all developed countries including Russia and that is almost twice as high as in South Africa (Mauer 2003). Currently the corrections “industry” in our nation is a \$65 billion enterprise, an increase of almost 600 percent since 1982.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time that we have been imprisoning and releasing increasing numbers of individuals, changes in our economy that have led to declining economic opportunities for low-skilled individuals, coupled with the exodus of inner city job opportunities for the low and medium skilled, have resulted in declining labor market opportunities for young, low-educated minority men. As a result, these individuals have become especially

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<sup>1</sup> An additional 750,000 individuals were in local jails in 2006 for a total penal population of two and a quarter million.

<sup>2</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics website, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/expty.htm>.

vulnerable to the new, more punitive criminal justice regime. The statistics are stark: by 1999, almost six out of every ten black male dropouts between the ages of 30 and 34 had been imprisoned at some point, compared to about one in ten white male dropouts (Pettit and Western 2004).<sup>3</sup> As our economy has become more highly skilled, our prisons have become disproportionately low educated—two-thirds lacking a regular high school diploma (Harlow 2003)—and African-American—40 percent as of 2005 (Harrison and Beck 2006).

The importance of these criminal justice and economic trends lies in this undeniable reality: almost all of these individuals will leave prison one day and return to the free world.<sup>4</sup> Over 600,000 people will leave prison this year, a three-fold increase over the 170,000 who were released in 1980. Furthermore, a disproportionate number will be returning to a relatively small number of distressed communities and neighborhoods. Not only will a large proportion of these individuals have low levels of education, many will also have low levels of skills, work experience, and pre-prison earnings, while at the same time “age of mass incarceration” criminal justice reforms will assure that they will have substantially less post-release supervision and assistance than in the past. In addition, the experience with the criminal justice system itself can present barriers to post-release employment. A felony conviction can leave ex-offenders with a social stigma that Nagin (1998) likens to a “scarlet letter.” Pager (2003) has shown through audit studies that this stigma is mediated and compounded through the lens of race. In addition to the potential stigma attached with a felony record, state laws often

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<sup>3</sup> According to the same source, the comparable figures in 1979 were 17.1 percent for black male dropouts and 4 percent for white male dropouts.

<sup>4</sup> Approximately 95 percent of the individuals who are incarcerated are eventually released. The 5 percent who are not are composed of those who die while in prison, who are executed, or who are serving life-without-parole sentences.

prohibit the employment of convicted felons in jobs ranging from child-care providers to barbers, and many jobs now require mandatory criminal background checks. Given these realities, many argue that the roles for prison-based education, vocational, and work experience programs are potentially more important than ever. Of course, the extent to which these programs can help ex-offenders reintegrate into mainstream society and stay out of prison depends on how effective they are.

## **THE EVIDENCE ON CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL, AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS**

### *Prisoners, Prisons, and Prison-Based Programs*

As a first step, it is worth stepping back to characterize the “typical” prisoner in our nation’s state and federal prisons, along with the common prison experience faced by the typical offender. In addition to the low education levels cited earlier, ninety percent of prison inmates are male, a third are less than 30 years of age, and half are serving sentences for non-violent crimes (Harrison and Beck 2006). The dominant track in prison for an offender sentenced to a non-violent crime is characterized by a relatively short stay in prison (less than 15 months on average with many in state prisons serving less than a year), spent mostly in medium- or minimum-security prisons before their release (Austin 2001). Even though the skill and education levels of the average prisoner are low, and even though time in prison could be seen as an opportunity to positively impact human capital levels, relatively small numbers of inmates are participating in prison-based education or vocational programs at any given time. In the latest Bureau of Justice survey of inmates, about one-half of the inmates in state and federal prisons were participating in some kind of education or vocational program in 1997, with the great bulk of these

participating in GED testing programs and/or vocational education programs. This means that at the time of the 1997 survey, fully one-half of the nation's inmates were not engaged in some kind of education or training program while in prison. Also, it is likely that these participation rates are even worse now as prisons have had to deal with increased crowding and strained resources as inmate populations have been on the increase since 1997.

The low rates of prison-program participation reflect several realities associated with prison life beginning with a shortage of staff and instructional space as these resources have often failed to keep up with the explosive growth in the prison population. Adding to these institutional constraints are the facts that (1) security issues trump the programmatic needs of offenders, (2) prison time is often given to work assignments within the prison associated with facility maintenance, services, and upkeep, and (3) prisoners often move from one facility to another as their custody level changes and in response to the balance between available bed space and differences in security levels across facilities. As one experienced correctional education officer stated: "Inmates face lots of idle time, but it is punctuated with lots of interruptions, from security checks and lock downs to medical issues that require attention, to mundane jobs they are often required to do" (Personal communication, Stefan LoBuglio, October 19, 2007). The overall picture is one where individuals with substantial education and skill deficits arrive at prison's door for a relatively short stay, and because of institutional arrangements and resource allocation decisions, they receive relatively little sustained education and vocational programming while they are in prison.

### *Previous Evidence on Program Impact*

Situated in the prison setting just described are three basic kinds of programs that focus chiefly on increasing the post-release employability of ex-offenders: classroom education programs (chiefly Adult Basic Education and preparation to pass the GED exams), vocational training programs, and “employment” programs designed to provide general work experience and training on specific jobs.<sup>5</sup> What do we currently know about the effectiveness of these kinds of corrections-based programs in (1) reducing recidivism or (2) assisting ex-offenders reintegrate into the labor market? Most observers would say that until very recently the answer is that we know very little about the causal impact of corrections-based skill and employment programs. It is not for lack of study that we know so little about the effectiveness of correctional programs. Indeed there have been hundreds of studies over the years of the many different prison and community-based programs designed to rehabilitate offenders and ex-offenders.<sup>6</sup> The problem lies in the quality and rigor of program evaluation in the correctional field. For example, in a 1999 meta-analysis of 33 corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs Wilson et al.(1999) stated that “Few studies [that were included in the meta-analysis] made any serious attempt...to control for biases produced by...self-selection into programs.”

Wilson et al. go on to state that:

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<sup>5</sup> Prison programs also focus on drug treatment and recovery, life skills, and cognitive behavioral skills that are designed to change the decision-making processes of criminal justice offenders. While any of these programs could, if effective, improve the labor market outcomes of individuals, since their primary goal is not to improve employment outcomes, they are not considered in this study.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting at this point that almost all of the program evaluation research has been focused on the effects of program participation on recidivism, with very few studies looking at labor market outcomes such as wages, earnings, or employment as the outcome of interest. This is partly because most criminologists are primarily interested in program effects on recidivism and partly because until recently, labor market information on ex-offenders has been difficult to obtain. The increased use of state unemployment insurance wage records by researchers is changing the latter constraint.

Future research that merely compares participants with nonparticipants of these programs is not needed to resolve the questions of the effectiveness of these programs, for it is well established that participants do reoffend at a lower rate than nonparticipants. Rather, the field needs high-quality evaluation studies that can provide a strong basis for establishing a causal connection between the activities of the programs with future positive changes in inmate behavior. (pg. 17)

In a paper published the next year Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie (2000) had this to say about the models that were used to evaluate the impact of correctional education programs on outcomes: “Although close to half of the [33] studies included in this synthesis performed some form of post hoc matching or statistical control, these controls were generally restricted to adjustments for the age and race distributions between groups” (pg. 361).

A survey of the correctional program evaluation literature suggests that the conclusions drawn by Wilson and his coauthors extend beyond the studies they examine to include much of the studies in this field. While there are some notable examples where serious attempts were made to balance program participants and nonparticipants on observable variables,<sup>7</sup> and while there have been some random assignment experiments of corrections-based programs, the results from these stronger studies give, at best, a mixed picture, and the great bulk of the field is characterized by the far less rigorous studies characterized by Wilson et al. In another study Farrington and Walsh (2005) conclude their meta-analysis of the 84 random assignment evaluations conducted in criminology between 1982 and 2004 with the observation that “rigorous evaluations of contemporary employment interventions for former prisoners are sorely needed” (pg. 311).

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Saylor and Gaes (1996).

This same conclusion is reached by Bloom in the most up to date review of employment-focused programs for ex-prisoners (Bloom 2006). The following points effectively summarize Bloom's findings:

- While there are no clear cut patterns of successful programs, “there are hints of success for older offenders, for programs that provide integrated services both before and after release, and perhaps for models using financial incentives.”
- The evidence to date does not support a conclusion that we already know what works and simply need to fund it, and this is primarily because some of the most promising findings that one sees in the literature come from some of the more weakly designed evaluations.
- And, the shifting economic and criminal justice contexts of the last decade and a half mean that a clear need for more definitive evidence as to “what works” still remains.

This survey of the literature leaves one both dissatisfied and discouraged. After many evaluation efforts over dozens of years it appears that we still do not have a good sense of the programs or even kinds of programs that can help offenders reintegrate into society. This pessimistic outlook should, however, be tempered by the convergence of three trends that may well influence corrections-based evaluations in the coming years. We argue that a similar convergence had an impact on education-related research in the 1990s with the results that (a) program evaluation in that field has gotten much stronger and more rigorous over the last decade and a half and (b) we therefore know more about



key features of this field such as the importance of class size or teacher quality on student achievement than we otherwise would have.

The first trend has to do with awareness. Much like what has happened in the world of education research and education policy, a consensus is emerging among researchers and practitioners in the correctional field that in order to solicit support from policy makers, funders, and legislative bodies, programs will be required to provide strong evidence that they are effective and in order for evidence to be considered “strong,” it will have to come from evaluations that are much more rigorous than in the past. The message seems clear: public money and foundation funds are tight, and the people controlling these sources of support have become a more careful, knowledgeable, and skeptical bunch. This happened in the world of education, and just as in education, this recognition is an important first step toward better evaluation research.

Second, just as more rigorous research is required, research designs and methods have become increasingly more powerful, appropriate, and sophisticated. Again comparable to what has happened in the last decade in education, it is likely that random assignment evaluations will play an increasingly important role in the corrections world. However, as is the case in education and other public policy spheres, there will be many times when experimental evaluation is not possible. Advances in econometrics and statistics, combined with a new generation of researchers who bring experience and sophistication in carefully thinking through and examining threats to causal inference, give one substantial hope that future non-experimental evaluations of corrections-based programs will be much more rigorous than the non-experimental evaluations of the past.

Third, as more rigorous evaluations are demanded and as our techniques for using data in more appropriate ways have grown, corrections-based data collection, management, and manipulation is beginning to catch up with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Again, this is comparable to what has happened in education. Just as in that enterprise, federal and state agencies, and even some individual facilities and programs have begun to collect, store, use, and share with researchers rich administrative data that can be extremely useful and often essential when it comes to evaluating programs and interventions. Also, with the increasing knowledge that definitive answers to the “what works” question requires and relies on good data, governmental agencies and private foundations are more aware that the funding of large scale surveys can have net social benefits.

If our analogy to what has happened in education research is correct, we should see stronger evaluations of correctional programs in the future. In the next section we present results from three recent studies that are suggestive of the potential direction of correctional program evaluation.

### **WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED RECENTLY? THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

#### *A Random Assignment Study: The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Evaluation*

CEO is one of the nation’s largest and most well regarded employment programs for ex-offenders. The goal of CEO is to improve the post-release outcomes of ex-offenders by providing immediate employment upon release via a highly structured and tightly supervised transitional employment program, as well as by continuing to monitor and offer services to program participants after they move out of transitional employment

into “independent” employment. The CEO experience begins with placement on a work crew within one week after enrollment in CEO. This work experience is highly structured and monitored and pays the New York state minimum wage. CEO staff work with program participants in developing good work habits while in the transitional jobs and then they help participants move off of the work crews into regular jobs. After the initial transitional job phase, CEO remains as involved as possible with program participants as they enter and compete in the labor market. One way they do this is by providing cash rewards of up to \$600 per year for individuals in regular jobs who bring in their pay stubs to CEO on a regular basis. The purpose of this reward system is to keep CEO staff connected to former program participants so that they can monitor how they are doing in their regular jobs and intervene with assistance when necessary. As a part of the Hard-to-Employ evaluation funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Manpower Research Demonstration Corporation (MDRC), in partnership with the Urban Institute, is evaluating the CEO program with a random assignment design.

Random assignment of CEO applicants between January of 2004 and October of 2005 resulted in 568 program participants who received the full CEO “treatment” and 409 controls who received some job search assistance. The first year results (i.e., one year after random assignment) from the CEO evaluation are interesting and tantalizing. These patterns emerge:<sup>8</sup>

- The employment effects of CEO participation are not impressive.

Employment differences between the treatment and control groups heavily

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<sup>8</sup> These figures come from the presentation of MDRC’s Dan Bloom at the June 2007 *Welfare Research and Evaluation Conference* hosted by the Administration for Children and Families and held in Washington, D.C. These publicly available slides can be found at <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/wrconference/agenda.html>.

favor the treatment group in the first quarter after random assignment as the treatment group members work in CEO transitional jobs. This CEO advantage falls steadily over the next three months so that by the fourth quarter after random assignment there are no statistical differences between the two groups in the probability of being employed.

- On the other hand, the effects of CEO on recidivism appear to be rather substantial, at least for the subgroup who came to CEO within three months of their release from prison and were randomly assigned at that point.<sup>9</sup> Within what is called the “reentry subgroup,” those randomized into the CEO program had statistically significantly lower arrest rates (1.7 percent versus 6.2), lower parole revocations (18.8 versus 27.0), lower reincarceration rates in the state prison system for any reason (9.6 versus 19.7), and lower reincarceration rates in the state prison system for a new conviction (0.5 versus 5.1) than did those in the “reentry subgroup” who were randomized out of the CEO treatment. These differences in recidivism largely disappeared when the whole experimental sample—those who applied within three months of release *and* those who applied at some later time—was used.

Taken together, these initial results from the CEO evaluation suggest some interesting conclusions to consider. First, since the recidivism results largely disappear

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<sup>9</sup> This “reentry subgroup” as they are called in the evaluation is a valid subgroup from the experimental evaluation standpoint since those who came to CEO within three months of their release and were randomized into treatment were compared to those who came to CEO within three months of release and were randomized into the control group. That is, the “reentry subgroup” is not an endogenously defined subgroup and so any treatment-control differences in outcomes can be attributed to CEO participation. See Orr (Orr 1999) for a discussion of endogenously defined subgroups.

when the whole sample is used, it appears that the CEO program model is most effective for offenders who come to the program and get employment assistance relatively soon after release (as do three-quarters of all CEO participants). Second, the fact that by the fourth quarter the CEO employment effects had largely disappeared the reentry subgroup, yet the program led to large recidivism effects for this subgroup, suggests that the *mechanisms through which employment reduces recidivism* may need more careful thought. Typical economic models of crime suggest that if higher wages and a greater probability of employment can replace the economic component of crime, the result should be a lower probability of engaging in criminal behavior. The CEO results suggest there may be other mechanisms through which gainful employment reduce criminal activity. For example, it may be that even though early gainful employment may not lead to greater employment by the end of the fourth quarter, employment in the months close to prison release helps ex-offenders to get through what criminologist Shawn Bushway calls “the toxic first year” after release.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent follow ups in the CEO evaluation may help us better understand some of these interesting first year findings and shed light on the linkages between employment, wages, and recidivism.

*Lessons from a Large-Scale Longitudinal Survey Study: Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offenders Reentry Initiative (SVORI).*

In 2003, the US Departments of Justice, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services established the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), a large-scale program providing over \$100 million to 69 grantees to develop programming, training, and state-of-the-art reentry strategies at the community

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<sup>10</sup> After three years, approximately 60 percent of released prisoners will have returned to prison. Half of these individuals return within the first year after release (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2002).

level. The SVORI programs are intended to reduce recidivism, as well as to improve employment, housing, and health outcomes of participating released prisoners. RTI International, a non-profit research firm, and the Urban Institute are involved in a five-year evaluation of SVORI funded programs. The 15-month post-release results from that evaluation are now available, and the results, while less than encouraging are nonetheless instructive.

In the SVORI evaluation, all ex-offenders who participated in SVORI-supported programs across 16 programs over 14 states and more than 300 jails and prisons form the treatment group. A comparison group was constructed from ex-offenders in the same facilities and released at approximately the same time, and the groups are balanced as effectively as possible using propensity score matching techniques. In a baseline survey prior to release, 74 percent of the treatment group and 73 percent of the comparison group indicated that they felt that they needed employment, education, or skill building services. Follow up surveys indicated that only 39 percent of the treatment group and 24 percent of the comparison group had received any employment, education, or skill building services. Post-release, only 15 percent of the treatment group and 8 percent of the comparison group had received any services, and nine months after release the figures were 12 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

The central lesson from these results is that the overall level of service provision, including the SVORI programs that were receiving federal funding, was substantially below what offenders indicated they needed prior to their release. So, even though SVORI program participants received a somewhat greater level of services both prior to and after release, there was still much unmet need according to the self-reports of the

sample members. Given the relatively low level of service provision, even among the treatment group members, fifteen month post-release results that showed very few statistically significant differences in outcomes between treatment and comparison group members is hardly surprising. The evaluation considers roughly 100 different outcomes across the broad categories of “self sufficiency and quality of life,” health, and reduced criminality. In only 19 of 107 instances did SVORI participants have statistically significantly better outcomes than the comparison group in the propensity score results.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is not clear what is the ultimate message at the early stage of this evaluation: that SVORI programs are mostly ineffective or that there is a substantial amount of unmet need when it comes to programming designed to help offenders reintegrate.

The lessons about unmet need as documented by the SVORI evaluation, should be placed beside what we already know about how the realities of prison life can disrupt or prevent program provision, program enrollment (as offenders move between facilities that do and do not offer programs they desire), and program attendance. Taken together, these facts of prison life and what the SVORI evaluation tells us about program provision suggest that it may be the case that few programs are delivered with “integrity” relative to their design. If it is indeed the case that few enrollees are getting the full “treatment” in any given program, it could be hard for even effective programs to show an impact.

*Learning About Education, Vocational, and Work Programs Using Administrative Data: The Florida Case*

Between 2000 and 2002 John Tyler of Brown University and Jeffrey Kling, then at Princeton University and now a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, worked

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<sup>11</sup> Also, the comparison group had statistically significant better outcomes in two instances.

with three state agencies in Florida to assemble a series of data sets that could be used to study criminal justice questions and issues. For this project the Florida Department of Corrections, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program worked in concert to provide the necessary criminal justice and labor market administrative records. The linkable data sets delivered to Tyler and Kling were stripped of all personally identifiable information and contain information on over one million records on all individuals arrested in Florida since 1990, with a complete panel on arrests, convictions, incarceration spells, rehabilitative program participation, and Florida UI earnings since 1994. The quality and richness of these data provide an opportunity to conduct rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of corrections-based programs in Florida, a state with one of the largest prison populations in the nation.

Using the Florida data, Tyler and Kling (2004) found that white offenders who entered prison as dropouts and obtained a GED had no better earnings after three years than did white dropouts who did not obtain a GED while in prison. On the other hand, this study found that minority group offenders (everyone coded as nonwhite in the data) who entered as dropouts but obtained a “prison GED” had earnings that were about 15 percent higher in the first year after release than minority group offenders who entered prison as dropouts but did not obtain a GED. Both findings are based on a specification that includes a rich set of personal demographic and criminal justice history variables as well as pre-prison earnings. The model also controls for all unobservable differences



between program participants and nonparticipants that are time invariant, a so called “fixed effect” model.<sup>12</sup>

While the results for minority group offenders are encouraging, the first year earnings gains for the GED holders fall in both the second and third years after release so that by the third year there are no statistical differences between those minority offenders who did and did not obtain a GED while in prison. It is worth noting that Tyler and Kling were able to show that for all groups, any simple comparisons (without controls) between those with and without a GED obtained while in prison would show a large, positive, and statistically significant “effect” of the GED on earnings.

For the purposes of this conference we estimated the effects of six different prison-based educational, vocational, or employment programs. An interesting feature of conducting this analysis is that we can compare program effects on the same population of inmates using the same techniques and the same data. Specifically, we examine three classroom programs (adult basic education (ABE), GED preparation, and vocational training) and three work experience programs (prison industries, work camps, and work release)<sup>13</sup>. We look at the effects of these programs on earnings for three years following

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<sup>12</sup> The fixed effects model is

$$Y_{it} = AFT_{it}\beta_{40} + GED_{it}\delta_4 + AGE_{it}\beta_{41} + YRQTR_{it}\beta_{42} + AFT_{it} * X_i\beta_{43} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{4it}$$

where  $i$  indexes person,  $t$  indexes time in quarters before or after prison,  $\alpha$  is the individual fixed effect,  $AFT$  is an “after prison” indicator,  $GED$  is a dummy variable indicating the possession of a GED in quarter  $t$ ,  $AGE$  is age at time  $t$ ,  $YRQTR$  is a vector of year-quarter dummy variables, and  $X$  is a vector of variables that includes education level upon prison entry, predicted sentence length, marital status and number of children upon prison entry, years in Florida prior to prison entry, whether a Florida resident and state or region of birth, whether employed prior to arrest, industry and occupation prior to arrest, whether or not an English speaker and whether or a confirmed U.S. citizen or alien, cumulative years in prison prior to the current prison spell, number of disciplinary reports ever accumulated in prison, type of offense for this imprisonment spell, and a measure of cognitive skills at prison entry. This fixed effects specification allows for the variables in  $X$  to affect post release earnings. For another example of this type of flexible specification in fixed effects model see Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan (1993).

<sup>13</sup> Florida’s prison industries engage in a variety of tasks – inmates grow sugar cane, digitize government documents, and make cardboard boxes. Inmates working in prison industries receive a nominal wage (20-55 cents per hour). Inmates in work camps clean roadways, perform grounds and building maintenance,

prison release, limiting our sample to male inmates who enter prison without a high school diploma to ensure that everyone is at risk for educational programming.

As did Tyler and Kling, we first showed that for all of the programs except ABE, simple comparisons between program participants and nonparticipants would show that program participation was associated with higher earnings and lower recidivism rates three years after release. However, when we fit the same fixed effects model used in Tyler and Kling, controlling for the available set of covariates, only two of the programs showed any positive effects. Based on the fully specified model, offenders who participated in a prison industry had earnings that were about 15 percent higher than nonparticipants and those who participated in work release had quarterly earnings that were about 24 percent higher than the earnings of nonparticipants. We found no recidivism effects for prison industry participation, but work release participants had recidivism rates that were 4, 5, and 6 percentage points lower than the comparison group in the first, second, and third years after release, respectively. These recidivism gains occur against baseline recidivism rates that show 30 percent return to prison with one year, 45 percent within two years, and 53 percent have returned to prison within three years after release. Again, most of the programs show recidivism effects across the three post release years in models with no control variables.

Although our detailed data allow us to move beyond much of the non-experimental research on prison programming, it is still important to wrestle further with questions of program selection based on unobservables. In other research, Berk

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and work on public construction projects. These inmates receive no remuneration. Inmates nearing the end of their sentence are eligible for a work release assignment. Inmates at a work release facility hold jobs in the community during the day and return to the secure facility at night. Inmates are paid the prevailing wage but these wages are garnished for room and board, victim restitution, and family support

investigates the work release program more carefully (Berk 2007). Using propensity score matching, this work tests whether the effect of work release participation on earnings varies with the propensity to be treated. We do find evidence that the earnings effect is largest in the tails of the propensity score distribution. We interpret this as evidence of a heterogeneous treatment effect or the increased importance of selection on unobservables in this portion of the distribution.

An insight from this research is that it is important to consider that interventions targeting employment might not be right for all inmates. If we take an economic model of crime seriously, one might not expect corrections-based employment programs, even effective ones, to have the same impact for all offenders. The reason is that one of the primary goals of corrections-based employment programs is to increase the employability and earnings of released offenders, and hence, reduce their proclivity to engage in criminal activity. Financial gain, however, does not motivate all crime, and so it is not clear how effective employment programs might be expected to be when it comes to “non-income generating” offenses. To explore this possibility, Berk separates offenders into two groups – those who committed income generating offenses (robbery, burglary, property theft, and drug sales) and those who committed non-income generating offenses (violent crime, drug use, weapons possession, and other offenses). While both groups of offenders have improved employment outcomes after participating in work release, only the income-generating crime group has a drop in recidivism. In many respects, this result is intuitive, but it is crucial to consider its implications. There is not one type of prison inmate, and there will never be one prison programming that meets the needs of all inmates. We do need to think carefully about what types of employment programs

improve labor market outcomes, but we also need to realize that better labor market opportunities will not eliminate the recidivism problem.

## **CONCLUSION**

The explosion in the prison population in this nation has translated into an explosion in the number of released ex-offenders who return to our nation's communities every day of every year. Given this reality, understanding the extent to which various correctional programs help or do not help ex-offenders reintegrate into mainstream society has never been more important. We argue that the relatively low quality of correctional program evaluation that has been the norm until recently has left us uncertain as to which, and even which types of, programs work. We further argue that research into "what works" in corrections may be at a critical juncture, similar to that faced by education research in the 1990s when three trends converged: (1) a growing recognition of the importance of more rigorous program evaluation centered on the idea that random assignment evaluations constitute the "gold standard" in program evaluation, (2) the development and increased use of more powerful and appropriate statistical and econometric research methods that could be brought to bear when random assignment was not possible, coupled with the emergence of a new generation of researchers who were much more accustomed and equipped to think hard and deep about causal inference in the social sciences, and (3) the emergence and availability of rich administrative data sets that could be used in program evaluation when random assignment field experiments were not in place.

Against this backdrop this paper asks “what do we learn from the latest research regarding ‘what works’ in rehabilitative programming?” We believe that the most important lessons from recent research are the following:

- First, it is very hard to have a substantial impact on the lives of adult criminal justice offenders. That is, research that seriously tries to account for positive selection into rehabilitative programs is often unable to reject the null hypothesis of no program effect on outcomes, be they labor market outcomes or recidivism.
- Second, this result should not be completely surprising given what we know about how hard it is to change life trajectories,<sup>14</sup> what we have learned thus far from the SVORI evaluation about the apparent under-provision of programs, and given what we know about how the institutional realities of prisons and prison life make it difficult to deliver rehabilitative programs in ways that comport with how the programs were designed to be delivered.
- Third, the early results of the CEO evaluation that show no employment effects, but substantial recidivism effects suggest that we need to think hard about the mechanisms through which an employment program might impact recidivism.
- Fourth, the results from Berk’s recent work release research suggest that the targeting of scarce program resources at particular types of offenders and ex-offenders could potentially have big payoffs. In particular, her

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion and evidence on this topic see Heckman (2000).

findings tell us that perhaps we should target employment programs toward offenders who commit “income-generating” crimes, with the potential corollary being that we might target cognitive-behavior or substance abuse programs at offenders who are in prison for “non-income-generating” crimes such as violent crime, drug use, and weapons possession.

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