

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasing Job Readiness and Reducing Recidivism among People Returning to Milwaukee County, WI, from Prison

Findings and Recommendations from the Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies (IRES) Pilot Project

Overview

On any given day, more than 22,000 people are incarcerated in 37 state institutions across Wisconsin, a disproportionate number of whom are people of color.¹ Every year, thousands of people return to the community after incarceration (8,725 people in 2014, 2,043 of whom returned to the City of Milwaukee); however, 30 percent of those people will return to jail or prison within 3 years.²

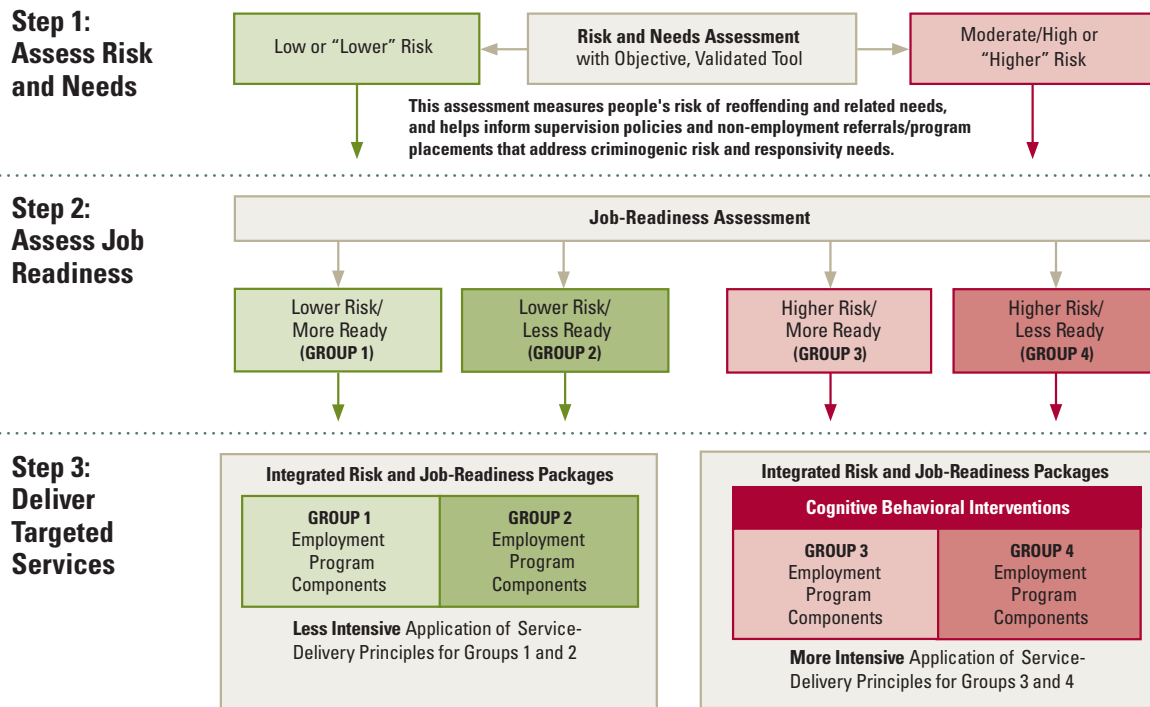
Policymakers recognize the importance of employment as a key aspect of successful reentry. They also recognize that the needs of this population are complex, and simply placing people in jobs is not a silver bullet for preventing reoffending. Although there is a foundation of research on effective strategies for both reducing recidivism and engaging hard-to-employ adults in the workplace, these efforts are often implemented on parallel tracks with limited coordination. To help people with criminal histories avoid reincarceration and succeed in the workplace, employment programs must move beyond traditional workforce services and address the individual's underlying attitudes that make them both more likely to reoffend and to have problems getting and keeping a job.³

In early 2015, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, was selected by The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) as one of only two sites in the country to pilot an innovative approach to reducing recidivism and increasing the employability of people returning to Milwaukee County from prison. The Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WI DOC) and Employ Milwaukee (formerly the Milwaukee Area Workforce Development Board) are leading the effort, and this site was chosen due to these agencies' committed leadership and mature infrastructure, as well as the strong presence of workforce agencies in Milwaukee County. The project is supported through a public-private partnership between the U.S. Department of Justice and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor.⁴

The approach pursued in this pilot project is based on the *Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies* white paper, which was published in 2013 by the CSG Justice Center to help corrections, workforce, and reentry practitioners navigate the complex issues related to coordinated planning and service delivery.⁵ The white paper introduced the Resource-Allocation and Service-Matching Tool, which is an integrated framework that allows the workforce development and corrections systems to triage their scarce resources and tailor service delivery in ways that reduce reincarceration and improve employability for their shared population. [See Figure 1]

The Milwaukee County IRES pilot project focuses on operationalizing a level of cross-systems coordination among corrections and workforce agencies on a scale rarely seen in the field. The project is guided by a steering committee that includes stakeholders from both the corrections/reentry and workforce development fields and is led by an executive committee, which includes Lt. Governor Rebecca Kleefisch (R), Senator Lena Taylor (D), Representative Rob Hutton (D), Mayor Tom Barrett (D), WI DOC Secretary Jon Litscher, and Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development Secretary Ray Allen.

Figure 1. The Resource-Allocation and Service-Matching Tool



The **Resource-Allocation and Service-Matching Tool** draws on research demonstrating that not everyone has the same likelihood of recidivating, and those at higher risk to reoffend require cognitive-behavioral interventions to address underlying criminogenic needs. Similarly, people who are less job-ready need different services than those who are more job-ready. Although this is intuitive, in practice it is common for agencies to offer a one-size-fits-all program approach.

About This Project

Milwaukee County receives the highest proportion of releases from WI DOC—28 percent—making it an ideal jurisdiction for piloting an approach to matching people to appropriate workforce services that could then be expanded statewide. More than 25 community-based agencies provide workforce services in Milwaukee County, but the WI DOC does not currently have a systematic process in place for using assessment information to refer people to specific programs. For purposes of this project, the focus is on adults being released from four WI DOC facilities (Fox Lake Correctional Institution, Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, Oakhill Correctional Institution, and Racine Correctional Institution) to Milwaukee County on community supervision (approximately 600 adults released per year).

The theory being tested is that by applying resources based on a risk and job-readiness assessment-driven referral process, recidivism and employment outcomes will improve. Thus, the pilot project has the potential to influence both correctional and workforce programming across the country by providing a replicable framework for organizing systems in a cost-effective way. This report outlines the key findings from analyses and resulting recommendations for systems improvements.⁶ The project involved analyzing risk and job-readiness profiles of people returning to Milwaukee County from WI DOC facilities, understanding the landscape of workforce agencies in the county, and identifying WI DOC processes for assessing both the criminogenic risk and job readiness of people at admission to prison and upon release and mechanisms for connecting them to appropriate workforce services upon release.

Key Findings and Recommendations

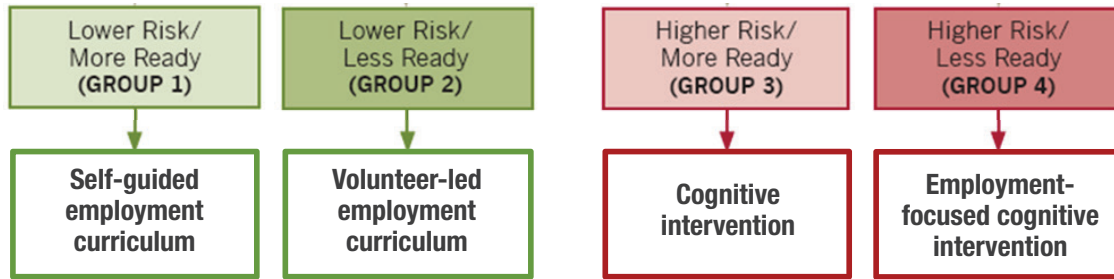
1. WI DOC staff administer risk and needs assessments and make referrals to evidence-based cognitive programming based on assessment results.

- The WI DOC conducts a validated criminogenic risk and needs assessment for all people upon their admission to prison. The majority of people (86 percent) returning to Milwaukee County from the four WI DOC institutions of focus are assessed as being at a moderate to high risk of reoffending.⁷

- The risk and needs assessment information is maintained in a database accessible to both prison and community supervision staff; however, community-based workforce agencies currently do not have the ability to access this information.
- During incarceration, people assessed as being at a moderate to high risk of reoffending are referred to Thinking for a Change (T4C), a cognitive-behavioral intervention that is designed to address needs related to one's likelihood of reoffending. The capacity to accommodate people that require this programming varies from facility to facility.

Recommendation: Determine each WI DOC facility's capacity to provide evidence-based cognitive programming to all people assessed as moderate to high risk of reoffense and increase capacity through trainings in evidence-based interventions, if needed.

Figure 2. Recommended Service Tracks During Incarceration



2. Workforce programming is not targeted to people's assessed level of job readiness.

- The risk and needs assessment includes questions regarding a person's education and vocational needs.⁸ According to these assessments, 73 percent of people admitted to the four WI DOC facilities of focus have educational or vocational needs, and there is a range of educational and vocational programming offered at the facilities, including adult basic education and pre-apprenticeship programs. However, enrollment in educational and vocational programs in these facilities is optional and is available on a first-come, first-served basis to anyone interested in enrolling, rather than being prioritized for people based on their assessment results.
- Windows to Work is a program coordinated by WI DOC and local workforce boards, and it provides a continuum of reentry services pre- and post-release. In-reach is conducted by the workforce board 6 months before release to address both criminogenic risk factors and job-readiness needs, and programming continues for 12 months after person is released.

Recommendation: Assess job readiness of everyone upon admission to WI DOC facilities.

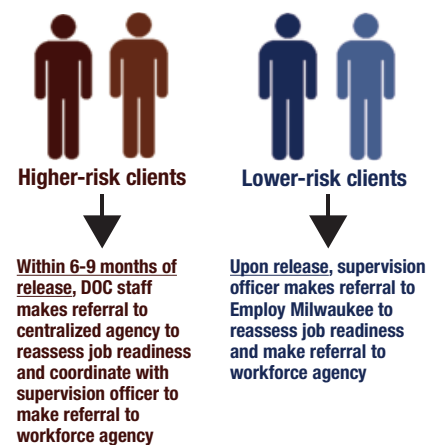
Recommendation: Formalize and develop appropriate institution-based programming for people with different risk and job-readiness levels. [See Figure 2]

3. Supervision officers often make referrals to community-based workforce agencies upon release, but referrals are not driven by risk or job-readiness assessment information.

- People are referred to supervision officers within six months of release, but due to limited capacity, officers are not always able to conduct reentry planning activities for every person under their supervision prior to release.
- Once released, community supervision officers make referrals to workforce agencies; however, these referrals are not consistently informed by risk and needs assessment information. Further, the officers have little information about which workforce agencies offer services that meet clients' particular needs.
- Some workforce agencies offer in-reach services, but these are limited, vary by facility, and are not coordinated in a way that ensures that risk and job-readiness assessments are informing program enrollment.

Recommendation: Contract with a centralized agency to complete job-readiness assessments and coordinate referrals to appropriate workforce agencies. [See Figure 3]

Figure 3. Process for Coordinating Service Referrals



4. Milwaukee County is resource rich with regards to workforce services for adults returning from incarceration; however, many workforce agencies do not deliver services in accordance with evidence-based approaches or target criminogenic needs when appropriate.

- There are more than 25 agencies that provide workforce services to adults returning to Milwaukee County from WI DOC facilities. The types of workforce services and way they are delivered vary significantly. While most workforce agencies specialize in offering differentiated services based on risk and job readiness, their services are not targeted to people based on their risk and job-readiness needs.
- Of all the people projected to return to Milwaukee County from the four WI DOC facilities involved in this study between April and September 2016, 69 percent are assessed to be at a high risk of reoffending and have high job-readiness needs. However, the majority of workforce agencies in the county are not equipped to serve this population effectively.
- The use of risk and job-readiness assessment results varies significantly across workforce agencies and in most cases does not drive what type of workforce services a person receives.

Recommendation: Ensure that people are referred to the most appropriate workforce agency based on their individual risk and job-readiness levels.

Recommendation: Assess service gaps and, where appropriate, provide trainings for workforce agencies on evidence-based practices that help reduce recidivism. Redesign contracts to encourage integration of recidivism-reduction interventions into workforce programs, as well as to promote specialization among workforce agencies or the development of service tracks for people with different risk/job-readiness groupings.

Next Steps

This report outlines the results of the first year of technical assistance under the IRES pilot project. The project steering committee will guide the implementation of these recommendations over the following year, with continued technical assistance from the CSG Justice Center, supported by BJA, and with guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Labor. A process evaluation will be conducted in the third year of the project to determine if the systems were able to successfully implement the recommendations.

Leaders in Milwaukee County and across Wisconsin are also working with the CSG Justice Center to review state legislation and engage business leaders in an effort to minimize barriers to employment for people with criminal records.

Endnotes

1. As of May 2015, 6.5 percent of residents in Wisconsin are black. However, as of July 2015, 46 percent of males in WI DOC custody are black. United States Census Bureau (2015); Corrections at a Glance (State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections, Division of Adult Institutions, 2015).
2. Data as of 2013; see <http://doc.wi.gov/about/data-and-research/budget-information>.
3. Extensive research has determined that although a criminal record is a very real barrier to getting a job, providing employment services to someone who is found to be at low risk of reoffending will not translate into a reduced likelihood of recidivism. This concept, commonly referred to as the “risk principle,” holds for all recidivism-reduction interventions, including employment programs. Lower-risk people (i.e., those with few risk factors associated with higher rates of reoffending or violating the terms of supervision as determined by an actuarial assessment tool) are likely to successfully reintegrate upon release without additional services. As such, resources expended on these people will have little added value. Furthermore, placing lower-risk people in intensive supervision and treatment can have adverse effects. Research shows that these programs can increase recidivism rates by disrupting existing social support systems, as well as increase exposure to higher-risk, anti-social people that may influence behavior. For more information on this topic, see E. Latessa (2011), “Why the Risk and Needs Principles Are Relevant to Correctional Programs (Even to Employment Programs).”
4. The IRES pilot provides \$300,000 in in-kind technical assistance and training for project stakeholders over a three-year period. The two pilot sites selected are Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, and Palm Beach County, Florida. In Florida, the pilot site lead agency is the Palm Beach County Criminal Justice Commission. Federal partners expect the pilot sites to inform the field and national policy on reentry and employment strategies. To learn more about the Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies pilot project, please visit <https://csjusticecenter.org/reentry/the-reentry-and-employment-project/>.
5. The Council of State Governments (CSG) is a national non-profit, non-partisan membership association comprised of state government officials from all three branches of government. The CSG Justice Center provides practical, nonpartisan advice informed by the best available evidence on criminal justice topics. The *Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies* white paper identifies core components of effective workforce programs for both less and more job-ready participants. Additionally, the white paper describes five principles for effective service delivery for both lower- and higher-risk program participants. To read the full white paper, go to https://csjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Final-Reentry-and-Employment_pp.pdf.
6. For more detailed findings, please review the final presentation to the Wisconsin IRES pilot project steering committee, found at <https://csjusticecenter.org/reentry/the-reentry-and-employment-project/>.
7. COMPAS assessment data represents people returning to Milwaukee County from four WI DOC facilities of focus between April and September 2016. From the COMPAS Core assessment, “higher risk” is defined as a medium, a medium with override consideration, or a high level of recommended supervision.
8. Identification of an educational or vocational need is identified in the COMPAS Core assessment by a probable or “highly probable” score on the education/vocation need scale.

Established by the Second Chance Act, the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC) provides education, training, and technical assistance to states, tribes, territories, local governments, community-based service providers, nonprofit organizations, and corrections institutions involved with prisoner reentry. The NRRC is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance and is a project of The Council of State Governments Justice Center, in cooperation with the Urban Institute, the National Association of Counties, the Association of State Correctional Administrators, the American Probation and Parole Association, and other key partner organizations. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of The Council of State Governments Justice Center or members of The Council of State Governments.

JUSTICE CENTER
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

 **the NATIONAL REENTRY RESOURCE CENTER**
— A project of the CSG Justice Center —

