



Justice Center

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

Beyond Recidivism: Measuring Employment Data After Incarceration

February 25, 2026

The Council of State Governments Justice Center

We are a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that combines the power of a membership association, serving state officials in all three branches of government, with policy and research expertise to develop strategies that increase public safety and strengthen communities.

Agenda

- I. Measuring Reentry Success
- II. Tracking Post-Prison Outcomes Using Longitudinal Administrative Data
- III. Agency Practitioner Perspectives: Managing Partnerships and Achieving Goals
- IV. Lessons Learned from DOC Research Team
- V. Q & A

Speakers



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Measuring Reentry Success

Recidivism Progression

Employment and Financial Stability

Housing Security

Health and Wellbeing

Social Reintegration



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Beyond Recidivism: Redefining Measures to Understand Reentry Success

To measure reentry success, states must look beyond recidivism, the traditional metric of re-arrest, conviction, or incarceration within a defined time period following justice system involvement.¹ Measuring recidivism is valuable, but it offers a limited view of the complex challenges faced by people reentering communities from incarceration.

Measuring recidivism alone overlooks critical aspects of reintegration that directly impact public safety and individual well-being. Recidivism rates don't capture whether people are stably housed, employed, or participating in substance use treatment—all factors that are essential indicators of successful reintegration.

Tracking and reporting on a broader set of measures allows states, particularly corrections systems and community-based organizations, to assess the effectiveness of reentry services and initiatives holistically, make more informed decisions, improve individual outcomes, and optimize resource allocation.² To see examples of how some states are applying these measures beyond recidivism, explore the goals that **Reentry 2030** states are setting to redefine successful reentry.

Collaboration Across State Agencies

Tracking meaningful reentry outcome categories requires a coordinated, multi-agency approach. Collaboration among corrections, education, health care, housing, social services, and workforce development systems and agencies ensures access to integrated resources. It also reduces service silos and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the reentry process. In addition, leveraging shared data systems or establishing data-sharing agreements enhances accountability, streamlines referrals, and supports informed decision-making.

Critical Elements to Measure



Recidivism progression



Employment and financial stability



Housing security



Health and wellbeing



Social reintegration

Employment success is multidimensional.

Employment Status

- Employed within 3, 6, or 12 months post-release
- Full-time vs. part-time status
- Industry or job sector

Job Stability & Retention

- Length of employment with same employer
- Continuous employment over time
- Hours worked per week over time

Income & Earnings

- Annual earnings
- Wage progression over time
- Income relative to poverty threshold

Workforce & Education Engagement

- Enrollment in training or education
- Credential or certification completion
- Employment in field related to training

Tracking Post-Prison Outcomes Using Longitudinal Administrative Data

NC Common Follow-Up System (CFS)



- **Individual-level data** on workers, the workforce/education services they receive, and their outcomes
- Includes data from workforce system, public high schools, public higher education, vocational rehabilitation, criminal justice, **and more**
- Extensive data on **justice-involved individuals**

CFS Products for Reentry

- **Reporting**

Post-release outcome metrics (recidivism, employment, college enrollment, etc.)

- **Correctional research and program evaluation**

Determining what works using scientific research methods

- **Blog articles, presentations, media interviews, etc.**

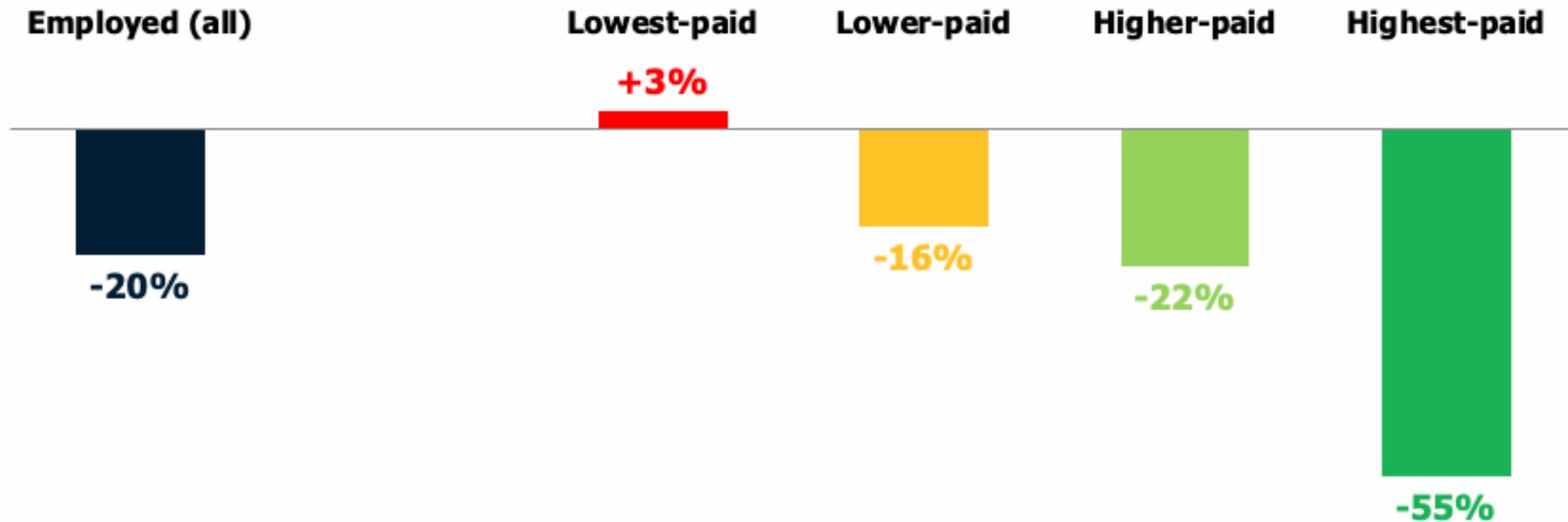
Helping the public understand the value of criminal justice + workforce data and what it can tell us

How does post-release employment contribute to successful reentry?

- **Economic incentive:** “Crime pays” vs. “Work pays”
- **Routine activity:** “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop”
- **Self-actualization:** “A legitimate path to success”
- **Social bonds:** “A reason to live right”

A “good job” immediately after prison prevents reincarceration in later years.

Relative Likelihood of Returning to Prison within Two Years, Compared to Non-employed

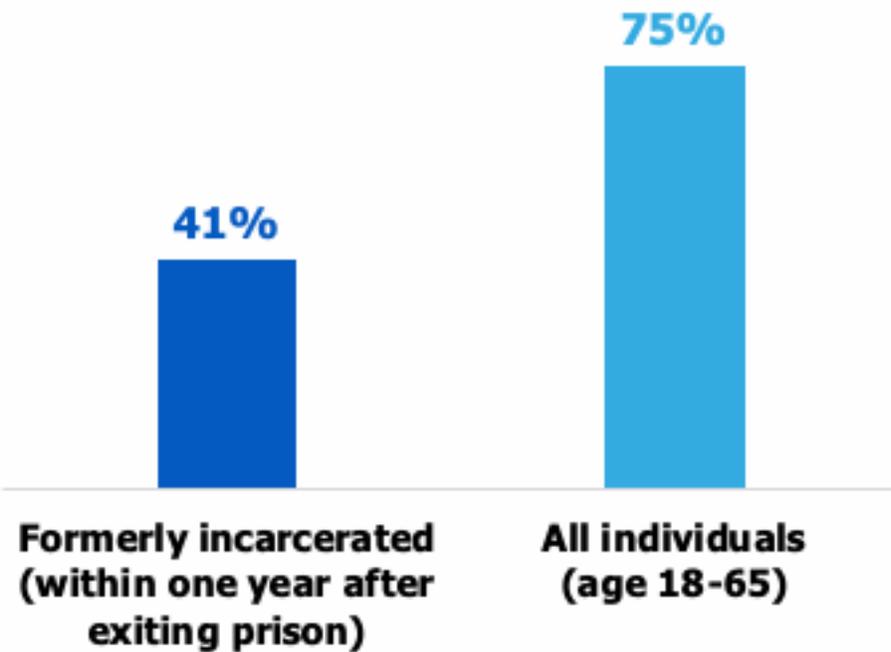


Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. The study cohort consists of prison exits during 2016. Includes statistical controls for demographic characteristics and pre-prison employment and criminal histories. The impact estimate for the lowest-paid workers is not statistically significant at the 0.1 level. All other estimates are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4083166

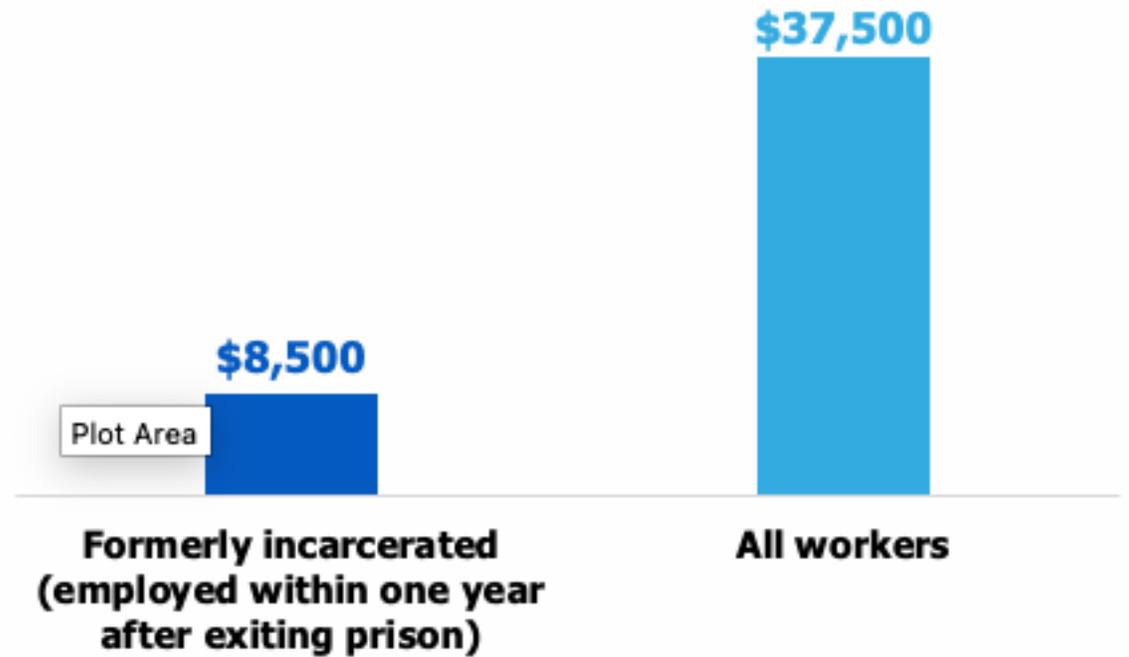
Unfortunately, finding a “good job” after prison is an uncommon outcome.

Employment Outcomes of Workers in North Carolina (2023)

% Employed



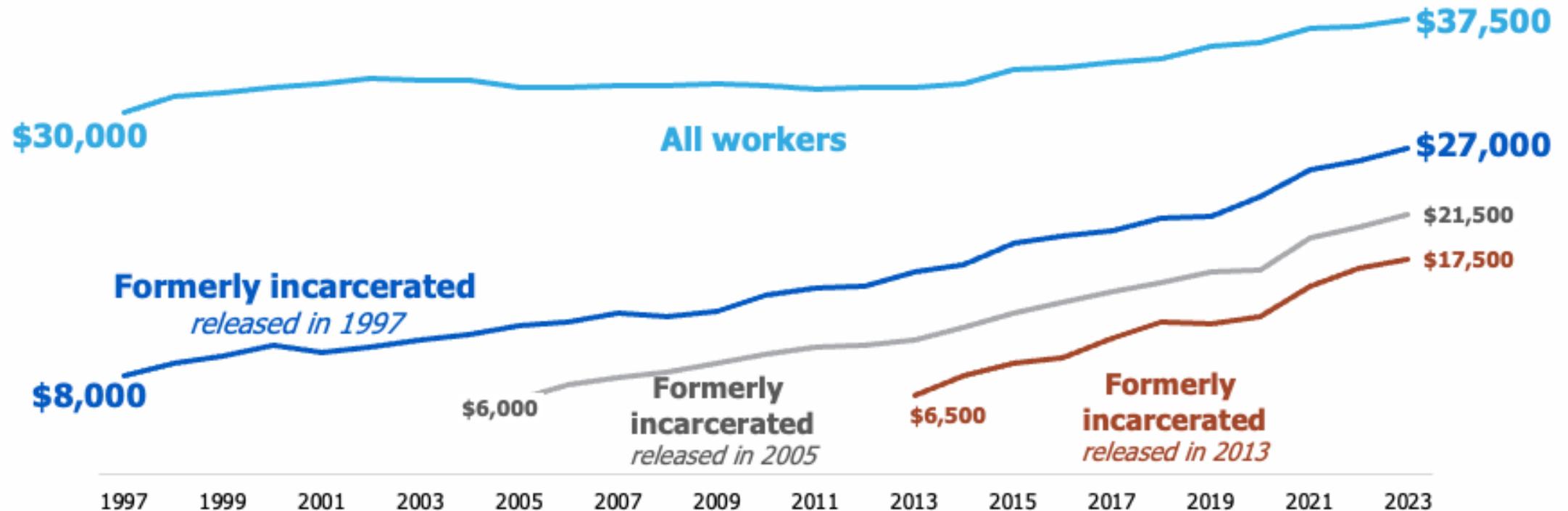
Median Annual Wage Earnings



Source: US Census Bureau (ACS) and NC Common Follow-up System
Wage earnings are rounded to the nearest \$500

Wage earnings improve following release but remain low even after 25+ years.

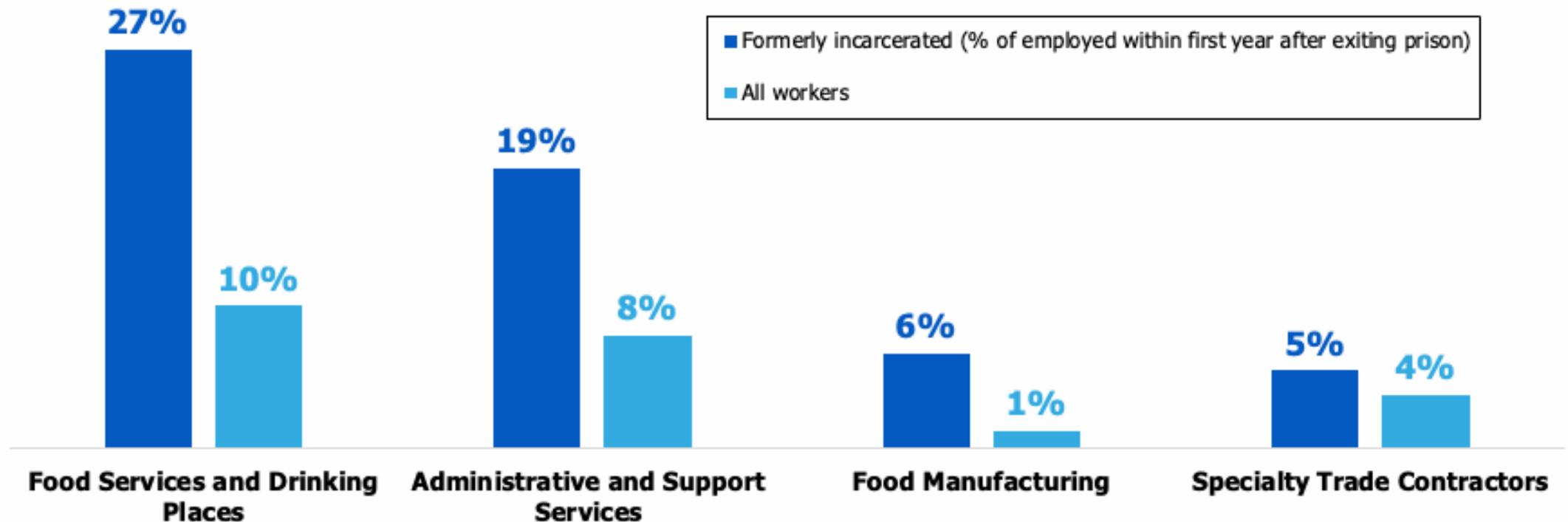
Median Annual Wage Earnings of Employed Workers in North Carolina



Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. Wage earnings are adjusted to 2023 price levels using the Consumer Price Index and are rounded to the nearest \$500.

The formerly incarcerated are segregated into a handful of lower-paying industry sectors . . .

Primary Sector of Employment in North Carolina (2023)

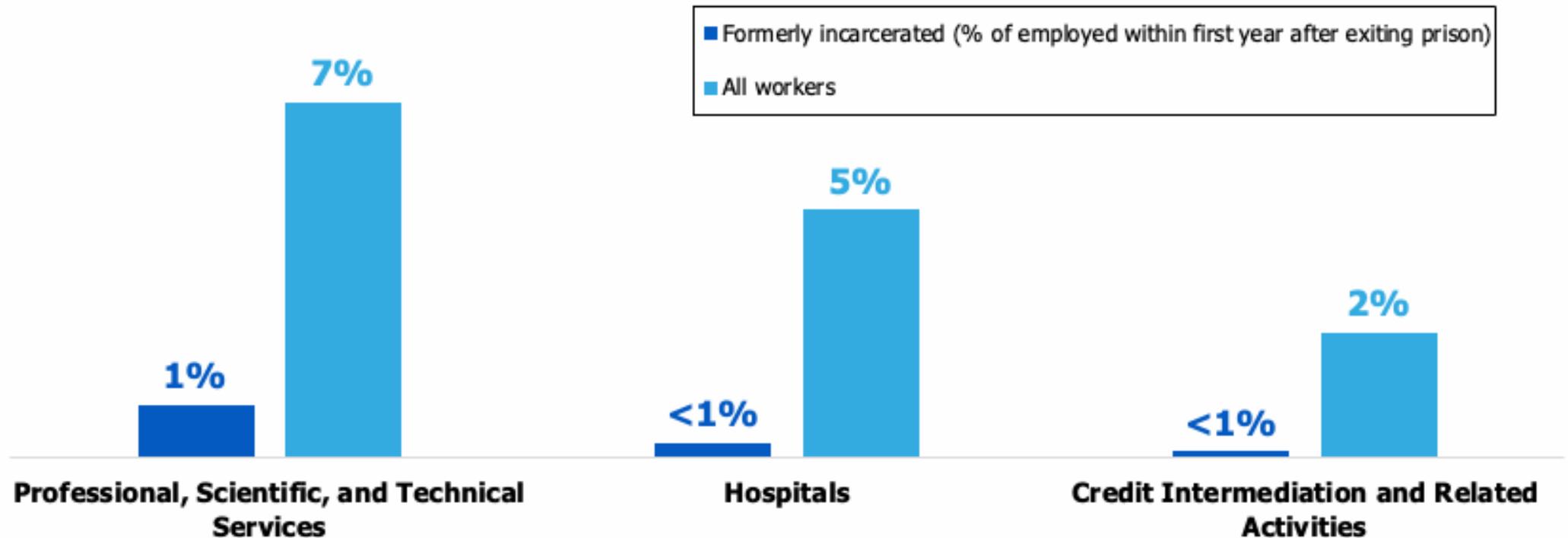


Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. Industry sectors are reported at the three-digit NAICS level.

... and are excluded from higher-paying sectors.

Primary Sector of Employment in North Carolina (2023)

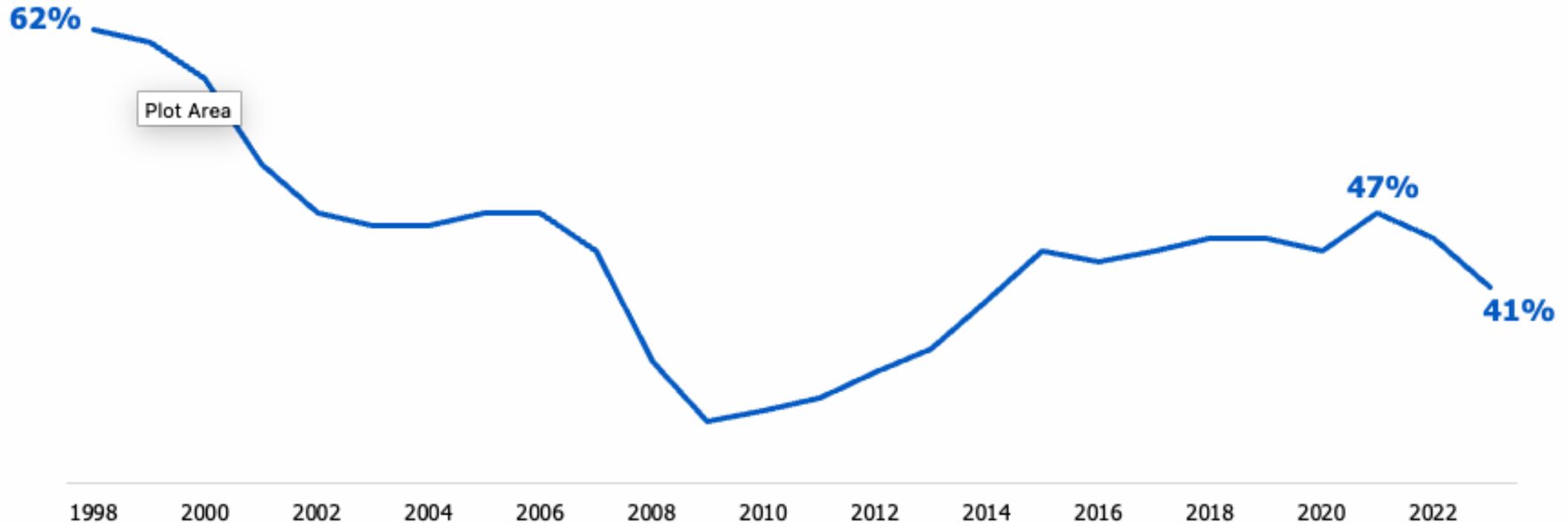
Selected large and high-paying industry sectors



Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. Industry sectors are reported at the three-digit NAICS level.

Fewer are finding work after prison than they did in the late 1990s.

**% Employed in North Carolina within One Year After Exiting Prison
1997–2023**



Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System

An increasing share are finding employment in lower-paying sectors.

Employment Outcomes of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in North Carolina

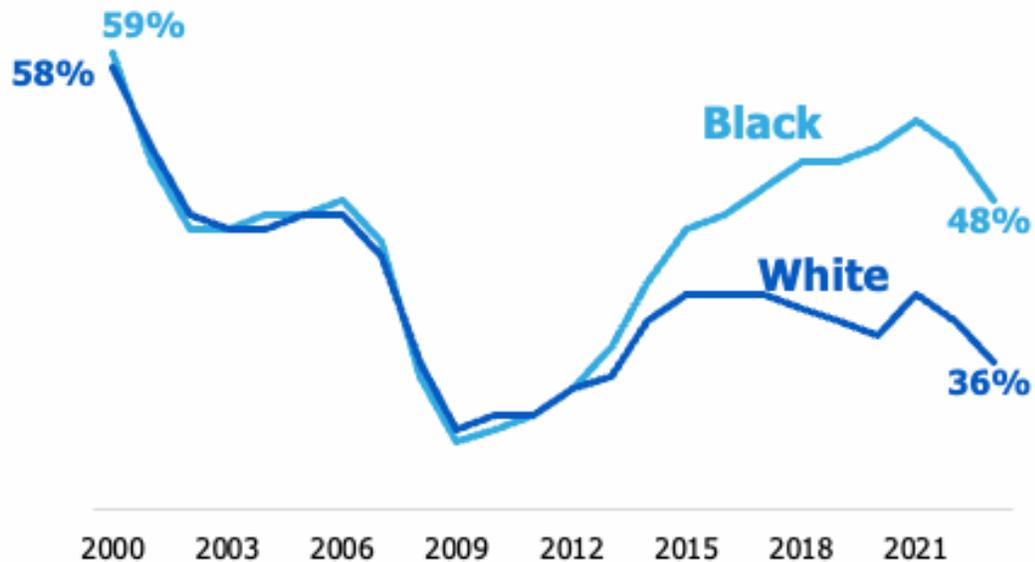
	1997	2023
Construction % of employed within one year after exiting prison	18%	8%
Accommodation & Food Services % of employed within one year after exiting prison	17%	29%

Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. Industry sectors are reported at the two-digit NAICS level.

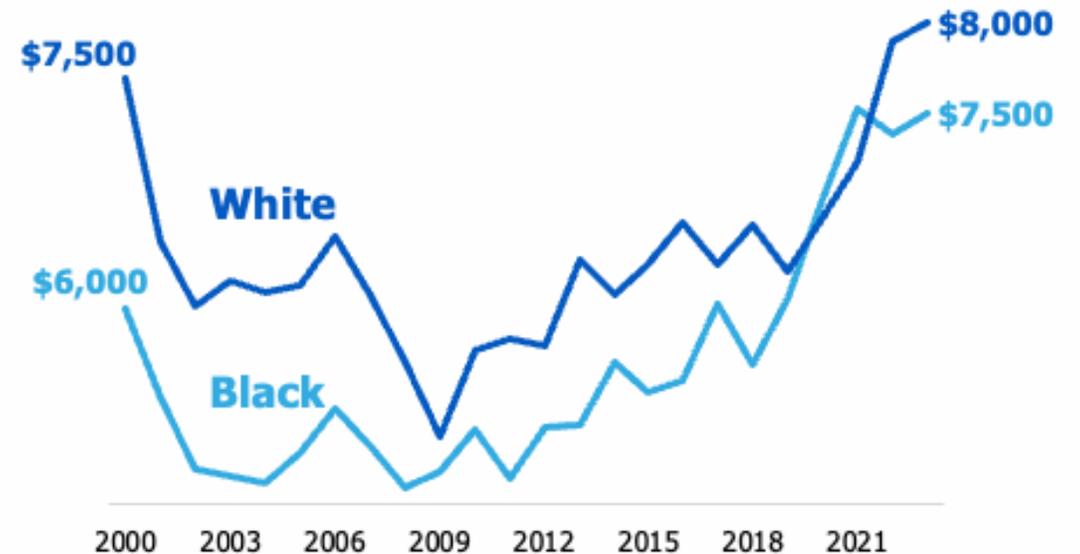
Outcomes by race have converged (and diverged) over time.

Outcomes of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in North Carolina by Race

% Employed
within one year after exiting prison



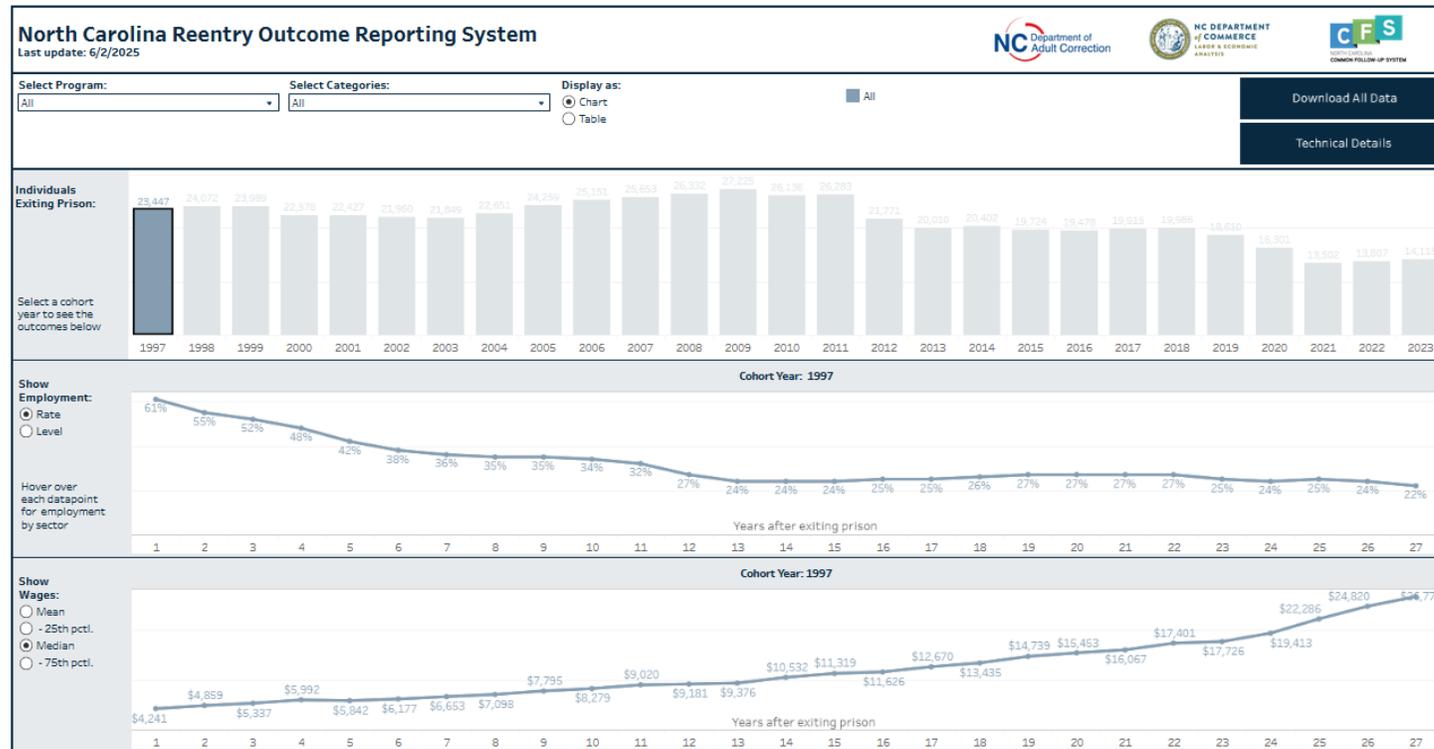
Median Annual Earnings
employed within one year after exiting prison



Source: Analysis of data from the NC Common Follow-up System. Wages are adjusted to 2023 price levels using the Consumer Price Index and are rounded to the nearest \$500.

You can access data on post-release employment using the NC Reentry Outcome Reporting System.

<https://analytics.nccommerce.com/NC-RORS/>



Agency Practitioner Perspectives: Leveraging Partnerships and Information Sharing

- 1. Build and maintain effective cross-agency data sharing partnerships** (e.g., North Carolina Government Data Analytics Center).
- 2. Manage capacity**—individual projects, stated research priorities.
- 3. Mindset matters**—leadership willingness and interest in pursuing, understanding, and meaningfully leveraging data.

Agency Practitioner Perspectives: Addressing Goals and Limitations

- 1. What specific questions do you have?** (“Does it work?” => “Is participation in this program during the 5 years pre-release associated with reincarceration within 3 years?”).
- 2. What data is available? Relevant?** Independent, dependent variables, outcomes, admission criteria, etc.
- 3. Anticipate limitations of operational data**—differences between data *collected for* research and data *being used for* research.

Lessons from a DOC Research Team: Engaging **External** Partners in the Process

- 1. Flip the script and ask the research question first** (e.g., researcher mailing lists; online portal; priority questions list).
- 2. Know when to say “no.”** Sometimes incentive structures don't align.
- 3. Be ready to herd sheep.** Enthusiasm and persistence are key.
- 4. This work is easier with money.**

Lessons from a DOC Research Team: Engaging **Internal** Partners in the Process

- 1. Your #1 job is to be the interpreter of jargon.**
- 2. Emphasize that the findings report is not a report card** (and that you know *it's not* and *can't be* the whole story, but it is the practitioner's story to tell).
- 3. Be ready to further summarize the end product** (we have a TL;DR version for *everything*).
- 4. Pre-analysis plans are helpful??** Stay tuned for confirmation!

Q & A

Thank You!

Join our distribution list to receive updates and announcements:

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/resources/newsletters/>

For more information, please contact Nicole Jarrett at njarrett@csg.org

The presentation was developed by members of The Council of State Governments Justice Center staff. The statements made reflect the views of the authors and should not be considered the official position of The Council of State Governments Justice Center, the members of The Council of State Governments, or the funding agency supporting the work.

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