

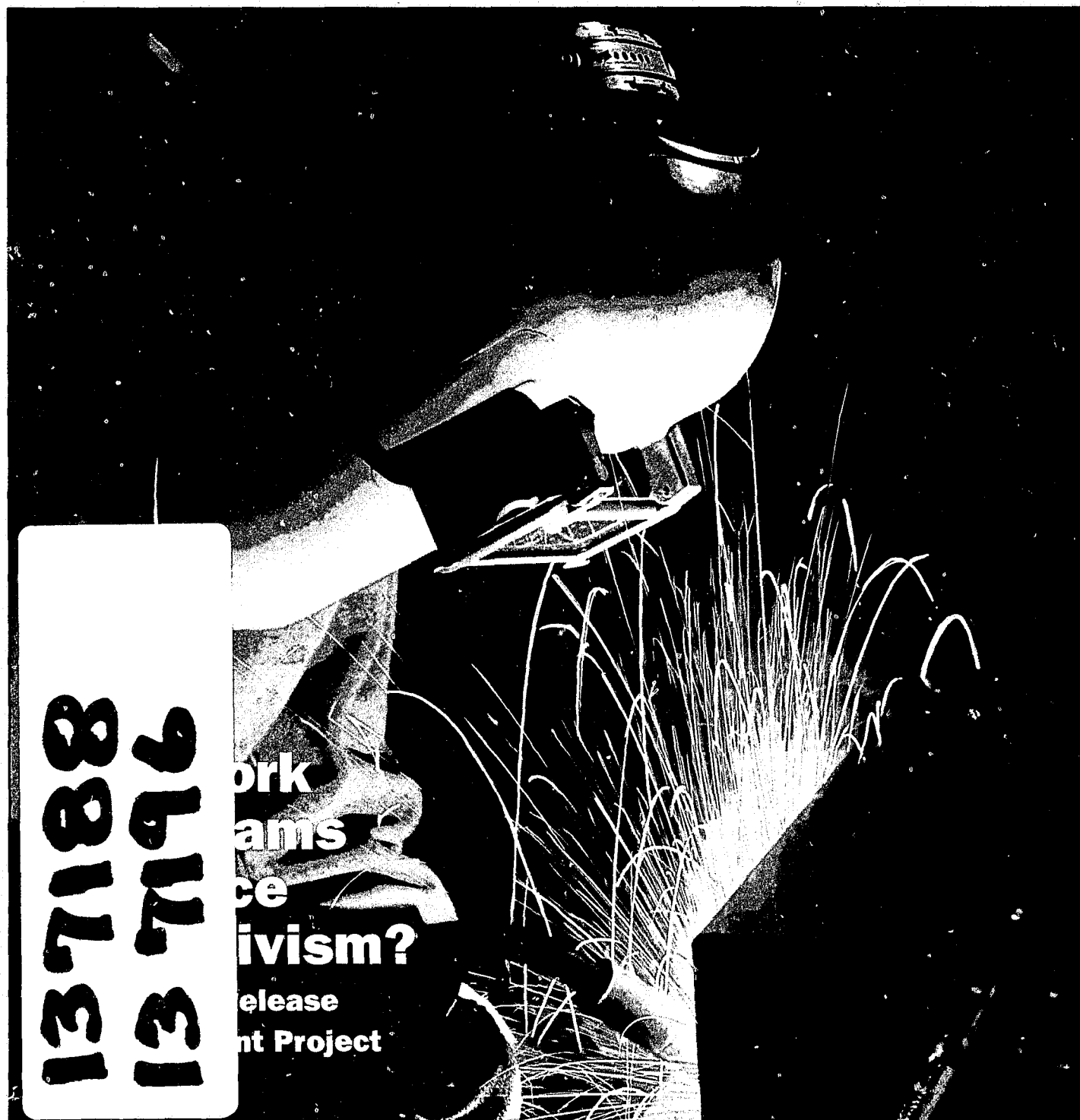
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The Post-Release Employment Project

Prison work has measurable effects on post-release success

William G. Saylor and Gerald G. Gaes

An argument for continuing or even expanding industrial work opportunities in prisons is that such programs are needed to cope effectively with inmate idleness and that they help ensure the orderly running of correctional institutions. Advocates also suggest that such programs may give participants a better chance of remaining law-abiding after their release from prison.

The Post-Release Employment Project (PREP), a study by the Bureau of Prisons' Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE), seems to support the notion that prison work and training programs have a significant positive impact on participants. Initial PREP results indicate that inmates who receive training and work experience during their incarceration are less likely to receive misconduct reports in prison, more likely to be employed during their halfway house stay and after release, and less likely to recidivate than similar inmates who are not trained or employed during their imprisonment.

PREP was designed to answer fundamental questions about the effect of prison vocational training and work experience on offenders' behavior when they are released to the community. This article provides an overview of the PREP study and discusses the effect that such training and employment had on inmates during their time in prison, in halfway houses, and after release.

Some basics about the study

PREP is primarily an analysis of the differences between Federal offenders who received training and work experience (the study group) and similar

offenders who did not participate in these activities (the comparison group). The study and comparison groups were also contrasted with a "baseline" group of offenders who represented all other inmates released in the same time frame as the study and comparison offenders.

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or day labor job.**

While the study and comparison groups were similar in terms of expected length of stay, individuals in these groups were much more likely to have a longer expected length of stay than inmates in the baseline group.¹ In addition, the conviction offense for study and comparison groups tended to be more serious than for the baseline group.

These differences are especially significant because they underscore the fact that PREP study group participants were by no means those individuals who seemed most predisposed to succeed in either a prison program or in the community after release. (See note 2 at the end of this article for additional information on methodology.)

Institutional adjustment

While PREP does not directly explore whether prison employment and job training programs help ensure the orderly running of correctional institutions, it asks a related and more specific question: Do inmates working in prison industries or participating in vocational training show better institutional adjustment than their matched comparison counterparts?

Initial PREP results suggest that program participants did show better institutional adjustment:

- Study group participants were less likely to have a misconduct report within their last year of incarceration.
- When they did have a misconduct report, it was less likely to have been for serious misconduct.
- Participants were rated by their unit teams to have a higher level of responsibility than their comparison counterparts. An inmate's level of responsibility refers to his/her level of dependability, financial responsibility, and the nature of his/her interaction with staff and other inmates.

Halfway house outcomes

The Bureau of Prisons contracts with halfway houses to provide qualifying inmates an opportunity, prior to the end of their imprisonment, to work in the community. This is also the first opportunity to recidivate. Although most study offenders were released through a halfway house, many of the comparison inmates were released directly to community supervision.

Almost the same proportion of study (83.9 percent) and comparison (83.3 percent) inmates successfully completed

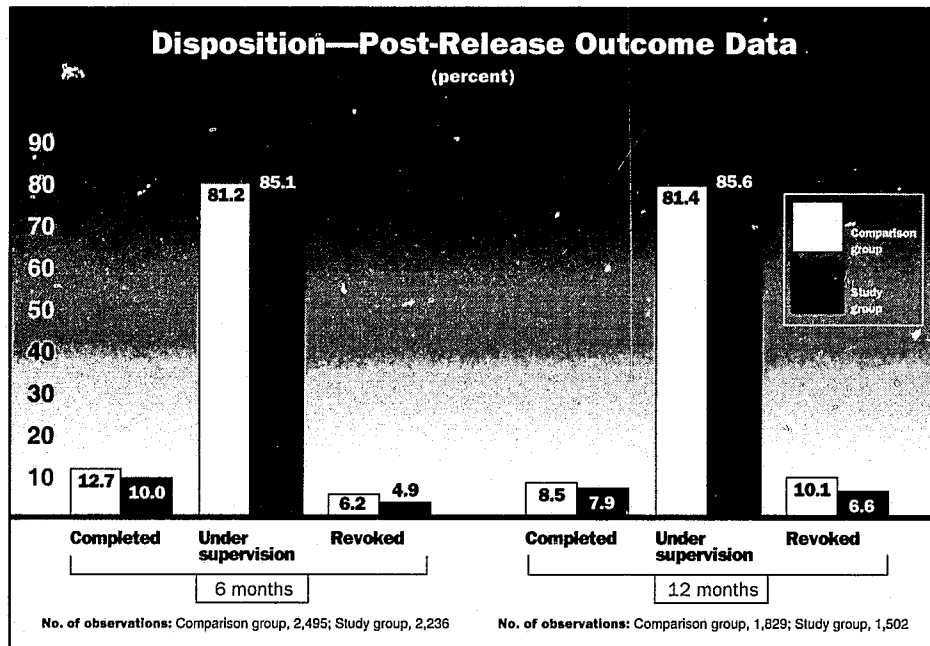


Figure 1 (see note 5)

their halfway house stay. On average, study inmates spent 98.0 days in the halfway house environment prior to their release to community supervision, while comparison inmates spent 93.5 days. Study group members were 24.4 percent more likely than comparison group members to obtain a full-time job (of some duration) at some point during their halfway house stay. Of the 3,070 study inmates released through a halfway house, 86.5 percent obtained a full-time job, while only 62.1 percent of the 1,043 comparison inmates released through a halfway house had worked at a full-time job.

Study group members were also 7.7 percent more likely to obtain day labor employment (e.g., a 1-day job performing unskilled labor at a construction site). Nevertheless, both study and comparison group members who obtained employ-

ment spent the same proportion of their entire halfway house stay on their job (on average, about 4.1 and 1.5 days per week on full-time and day labor jobs respectively).

In summary, at the point of halfway house release, both study and comparison offenders were equally likely to have successfully completed their halfway house stay, although study inmates were far more likely to have obtained a full-time or day labor job.

Post-release outcome

Once released to community supervision, study and comparison group members were followed by making phone calls to their supervising probation officers. Followup occurred at 6- and 12-month intervals. However, monthly information was collected over the entire interval.

Figure 1³ (see note 5) shows the 6- and 12-month dispositions for study and comparison group members. At both the

6- and 12-month followup points, study group offenders were less likely to have been revoked from parole supervision.⁴ Although the magnitude of difference may seem small, the differences are both statistically significant and substantively meaningful. At the 12-month time period, 10.1 percent of comparison offenders had been revoked, while only 6.6 percent of study offenders had been revoked. In other recidivism studies conducted by the Bureau, about 20 percent of released inmates were revoked or rearrested within a year of their release. In 1980, the percentage was 19.4; in 1982, 23.9; and in 1987, 19.2.

Although not depicted in Figure 1, study and comparison groups were statistically indistinguishable in their reason (parole violation vs. new offense) for being revoked at both the 6- and 12-month junctures. Nevertheless, the predominant reason for revocation during each 6-month period (60-70 percent) for both groups was a parole violation rather than a new offense.

The differences among study, comparison, and baseline groups indicate several important conclusions:

- Due to the research design and the matching methodology, there are characteristics of both study and comparison offenders that decrease each group's likelihood of recidivating.
- UNICOR work experience and vocational training further increase the likelihood of post-release success.
- Had we compared the study group to the general population (i.e., the baseline group), even with statistical controls, it is likely we would have exaggerated the differences between offenders who participated in work and vocational training and those who did not.

Table 1 (see note 6) shows the proportion of study and comparison group offenders who were employed during the followup period in any given month. It also shows the average wages earned in each month, as well as the 6- and 12-month totals. Although not indicated in Table 1, there is tremendous variability in postrelease wages, which is probably why most comparisons did not reach statistical significance. The table shows that study group offenders were more likely to be employed in any of the 12 months following their release to the community. At the end of 12 months, study group inmates had averaged about \$200 more in wages than comparison group offenders. Although this result was not statistically significant, it seems to be a pattern worthy of continued observation.

In summary, inmates who participated in UNICOR work and other vocational programming during their imprisonment showed better institutional adjustment, were less likely to be revoked at the end of their first year back in the community, were more likely to be employed in the halfway house and community, and earned slightly more money in the community than inmates who had similar background characteristics, but who did not participate in work and vocational training programs.

Future analyses and reports

The analyses discussed in this report represent only the most fundamental differences between study and comparison offenders. Future analyses will address mobility issues—the impact of prison work and vocational training on changes in occupations before, during, and after release from prison. We will also analyze specific occupational work

Employment—Post-Release Outcome Data				
Month	Percentage of offenders employed		Average wages earned	
	Comparison group	Study group	Comparison group	Study group
1	65.6	74.7	\$ 668.25	\$ 723.57
2	65.5	75.1	693.45	737.17
3	65.8	74.2	703.32	727.80*
4	64.7	72.8	701.09	733.82*
5	63.7	71.1	693.12	720.77*
6	61.1	68.6	676.35	701.29*
No. observations	(2,506)	(2,253)	(2,506)	(2,253)
Months 1-6 (\$)			\$4,135.59	\$4,344.42*
7	71.8	79.2	851.02	846.10*
8	70.7	77.1	835.92	845.98*
9	68.8	76.1	828.03	833.50*
10	66.7	74.3	815.57	822.21*
11	64.9	72.9	793.06	822.97*
12	63.1	71.7	769.45	820.97*
No. observations	(1,831)	(1,503)	(1,831)	(1,503)
Months 7-12 (\$)			\$4,893.06	\$4,991.72*
Months 1-12 (\$)			\$9,665.88	\$9,862.82*

*No statistically significant difference for these comparisons.

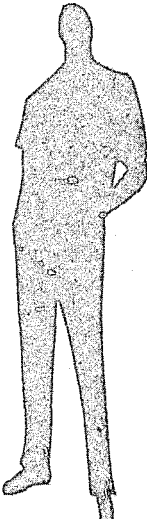


Table 1 (see note 6)

and training effects to the extent the data allow. Every inmate's job or vocational training was classified according to the Department of Labor's Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT). These DOT codes will allow us to look at broad, as well as more refined, classes of occupations and their impact on post-release outcome.

Additionally, work evaluations conducted by the inmates' supervisors and ratings of the inmates' performance in vocational training courses were collected on study inmates while they were in prison. This performance information will allow us to examine whether the intensity of an inmate's work or training performance affects post-release success.

We have also collected economic climate data. Data such as unemployment statistics, industrial sector information, and information on the demographic characteristics of the areas to which inmates were released will allow us to

statistically control for differences in economic and labor market conditions and to examine the relative impact of these economic climate data in relation to work and vocational training.

It is likely that the economic climate of an area is an important determinant of an offender's community employment. We are well aware that many ex-offenders not only must overcome low skill levels, but also the conditions that compound the already formidable challenge of finding and keeping a job, given the stigma of past incarceration.

In this context, these economic climate data will not only provide statistical controls, but may be valuable in helping us to assess the value of specific skills acquisition.

If you have any questions or comments about the information presented in this article, please contact the authors at the Bureau of Prisons' Office of Research and Evaluation, 202-724-3118. ■

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Notes

1. Actual time served was computed for the study and comparison groups and, as one would expect, based on the projected length of incarceration, the study group served more time than did the comparison group. On average, study group inmates served about 6 months longer than comparison group inmates.

2. Preparation for the Post-Release Employment Project began in 1983. Data collection on post-release outcomes for more than 7,000 inmates continued, for the most part, into early 1987, although some data came in as late as October 1987.

Throughout the duration of this project, in which study and comparison inmates were released from the Bureau (1984 through 1986), about 35 percent of inmates in institutions with Federal Prison Industries (UNICOR) operations were employed by UNICOR. Currently, 32 percent of inmates in such institutions are employed by UNICOR. We do not know whether there is an optimal level of UNICOR employment in an institution. Increasing or decreasing the percentage of inmates employed in prison industries may or may not increase the positive effects of employment. Consequently, the conclusions of this study could be influenced by the proportion of inmates employed by UNICOR.

Unlike most studies of prison vocational training or work experience, PREP is a prospective, longitudinal study. Study inmates were identified by case management staff at the institution over a period of several years.

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Inmates were selected for the study group prior to their release if they had participated in industrial work for at least 6 months or had successfully completed vocational instruction. The study group was composed primarily of inmates with UNICOR work experience—57 percent had exclusively UNICOR work experience, while 19 percent had a combination of UNICOR work experience and vocational training, or apprenticeship training. The remaining 24 percent were involved in some combination of vocational or apprenticeship training. The comparison group was chosen to be as much like the study group as possible. A comparison observation was selected specifically for each study group member from a cohort of individuals who were released during the same calendar quarter. Each pairing was based on an exact match of gender and individual security level and on the closest possible match in criminal, educational, and employment histories and characteristics of the current offense.

3. All of the results in Figure 1 are statistically significant. In Table 1, contrasts are statistically significant unless indicated with an “*.” Statistical tests in Figure 1 and the employment data for Table 1 are chi-square tests for differences in proportions. The statistical tests for employment wages in Table 1 were based on

t-tests of differences in group means. We have also noted in each table the different number of observations. Not all information was collected or available on all observations in this study. Furthermore, as the study progressed through the post-release outcome stages, inmates would be revoked, or otherwise drop out of the study (e.g., successfully complete their period of supervision).

4. Study group members who participated exclusively in UNICOR were also less likely to have their supervision revoked than were comparison group offenders.

5. (Figure 1): The data in Figure 1 show that about 600-700 fewer inmates from each group were represented in the 12-month followup than in the 6-month followup. The reason for this is that when the PREP study was terminated, there were about that number of offenders still in the “pipeline” for whom no 12-month outcome data was collected.

6. (Table 1): The increase in the percentage employed between months 6 and 7 for both groups is a statistical artifact. This is because the percentages are based on the number of observations still under supervision at the end of each 6-month interval. However, this does not influence the monthly comparisons between the two groups.

For the same reason, the average wages diminish over each 6-month interval. This is because the wages earned during the month (the numerator) are zero for any individual who was unemployed during a month and consequently earned no money, while the number of observations (the denominator) used to calculate the average is determined by the observations still under supervision at the end of each 6-month interval.

Although some individuals retained a job over the entire observation period and may have maintained, or even increased, their remuneration, the average wage for the group declined due to the increase in the number of individuals who became unemployed for some period of time and therefore earned zero dollars for those months.