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Prisons, Work and Re-Entry

by jeremy travis

Corrections officials and politicians frequently disagree on issues related to inmate confinement. In recent years, we have witnessed clashes between managers and legislators over good time and release policies, drug treatment, conjugal visits and weight rooms, in addition to the commonplace debates over levels of resources. Despite the many areas of disagreement, at least one issue engenders positive sentiment from both groups: inmates and work. Legislators of diverse political persuasions support constructive labor in prisons, as do managers in diverse state environments. How, then, do we explain the relatively low participation in work programs by our 1.2 million prison inmates?

The following describes some recent developmental efforts by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to promote an increase in inmate labor participation, both in prisons and after release. These efforts are timely in light of prison population growth rates and emerging evidence on the value of labor as a crime control device.

Today's rationales for putting inmates to work are more compelling than ever. Leading speakers on the issue offer both moral and economic viewpoints:

- In a full-employment economy, America must invest in bringing all of its human capital to market.
- Prisons house a 1 million-plus labor force that drains, rather than contributes to, American productivity.
- Prisons in America suggest idleness, not work, as their alternative to crime.
- Productivity inside prisons promotes productivity outside prisons as inmates are released to the community.
- Internal prison operations (e.g., food production, clothing manufacturing) reduce taxpayer expenses.
- About one-third of all inmates leave children behind. Gainfully employed inmates could contribute to child and family support.
- Inmate labor reflects restorative justice and contributes to victims' relief.

Despite considerable support from diverse political interests and efforts by numerous corrections professionals, commercially rewarding work within American prison systems occupies some 78,000 inmates, only about 6 percent of the American inmate population. Within that figure, some 2,800 engage in labor for private sector manufacturers. Figure 1 indicates the state-by-state percentages of inmates engaged in prison industries. In 1997, 5 percent of state inmates were assigned to prison farms.

Other industrialized countries also are wrestling with ways to employ their inmates. Some seem somewhat more successful than the United States. England, for example, employs about one-sixth of its inmates in industrial and farming activities. While data are not currently available to compare U.S. inmate characteristics to those in other industrial nations, there is at least the possibility that lessons could be learned from abroad.

Surmountable Barriers

Corrections professionals have cited several reasons for low work participation rates. Although NIJ acknowledges these barriers, we believe that, taken separately, they are surmountable. Listed below are not only the most common reasons why more inmates do not work, but also some possible remedies:

- *Facilities.* Prisons were not meant to be factories. There is limited space to manufacture, assemble or package goods. Solution: Redesign facilities to accommodate factory, workshop and office-like areas, or transport inmates to off-site, secure factories.
- *Security and Safety.* Inmate movement creates opportunities for escape and/or violence. Solutions: Make use of redesigned space to limit these opportunities. Embrace modern electronic technologies to detect escapes and to track escapees in open space labor settings.
- *Work Ethic.* Inmates have no expectations other than "doing time." Many have never

engaged in serious meaningful work for sustained periods. Solutions: Fashion incentives and rewards not only for work but also for work quality. Make work the norm rather than the exception. Pay the prevailing wage whenever possible or provide other work incentives.

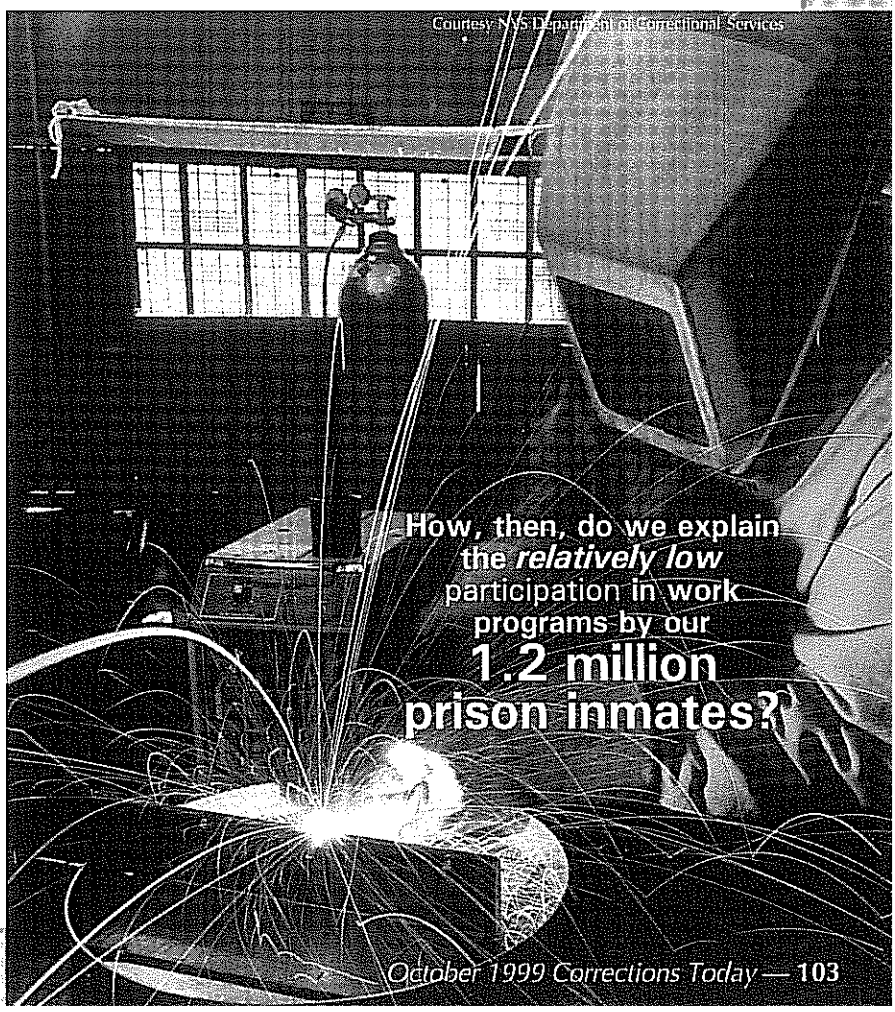
- *Management Mind-Set.* Wardens and staff are oriented toward population control and housing. They have no incentive other than relief of idleness to expand inmate labor opportunities. Solutions: Build profit-sharing and promotional opportunities for correctional staff engaged in prison industries. Build private sector partnerships that leave production and marketing issues to entrepreneurs and control issues to administrators.
- *Inmate Skills.* Many inmates are poorly educated and trained for productive labor in an information-based rather than manufacturing-based economy. Literacy and possession of the requisite skills required by the employment market are serious problems. So, too, are inmate motivation and the funding to support correctional education and skill development. Solution: Revisit the notion of simultaneous correctional training, industry and education; build training and education partnerships with the business sector as has been done with the welfare-to-work population. Many such partnerships already exist.
- *Management Skills.* Prisons have difficulty recruiting and retaining talented marketing and production managers. Those familiar with the history of correctional industries are aware of the significant contributions that NIJ made during the 1980s to the development of training curriculums for prison and correctional industry administrators, as well as funding training sessions and technical assistance. The work has been continued by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and leadership has been provided from within by members of the Correctional Industries Association. Solution: Continue to support professional training in critical marketing and managerial skills; offer financial incentives for increased productivity; and consider obtaining this expertise through contractual and partnership arrangements.
- *Restricted Product Markets.* Prison industries are constrained by law in their abilities to offer goods and services that compete with the American domestic industry. Solution: Change laws to remove restrictions.
- *Location.* Prisons are not conveniently located for daily interaction with private sector partners. Solutions: Search for industries that present minimal logistical challenges; permit access to laborers over wider time frames, including evenings and weekends. Consider transporting inmates to external work locations. In addition, identify industries that engage in work that is not location-dependent.

These reasons are a fair representation of the difficulties encountered when states try to expand their work force efforts. However, the listing above also exposes another point: It is the quantity, not the intractability, of barriers that blocks fuller inmate employment.

Proposed Solutions

NIJ has proposed a long-range demonstration program that systematically identifies, solves and removes obstacles to full employment in prisons. It is a very ambitious undertaking, but one that is fundamental to meaningful reintegration of offenders into open society. While the program would depend upon additional funding from Congress to implement fully, NIJ will explore ways to advance the notions intrinsic to the program within existing resources, regardless of Congressional action.

The demonstration effort would employ two strategies concurrently: Model Prisons and Model Programs. In Model Prisons, NIJ would work in partnership with at least three state systems to gradually expand the percentage of inmates employed for more than six to 10 years by systematically confronting challenges posed by the obstacles cited earlier. In Model Programs, NIJ would support annual innovation competitions that offer incentive grants for experiments within larger numbers of individual institutions. Model Prisons applies the best that is known today



comprehensively to achieve full employment in those systems, while Model Programs develops new approaches to employment and improves the state of the art.

Model Prisons. NIJ would seek long-term (six to 10 years) partnerships with three to five prison systems to methodically remove barriers to prison manufacturing and employment. Some obstacles would require management analysis and reformation. Others might require legislation to remove production restrictions on prison products. Many other changes would be structural, requiring redesign and reconfiguration of prison space.

Model Prisons would operate through a series of planning, implementation and evaluation cycles. In the developmental stages, NIJ would work with prison officials and state policy-makers to break down obstacles to employment and to target one or more obstacles every year for resolution. Through a combination of technical assistance and demonstration funds, NIJ would help officials develop the plans, financing, training, management structures, incentives and legislation needed to implement changes within designated prisons.

All activities would conduct an on-site analysis and evaluation to monitor progress, facilitate development, identify technical assistance needs and document processes and results. Interim assessments would review the results of individual actions and modify them as appropriate. Sites then would elect new target problems and repeat the planning, implementation and evaluation cycle. Continuation funding would be contingent upon successful completion of earlier efforts and attainment of numerical work force targets.

Model Programs. NIJ would sponsor and administer competitive incentive grants open to all prison systems interested in developing innovative prison employment strategies. Model Programs would involve an annual competition much like what NIJ has instituted for the Corrections and Law Enforcement Family Support (CLEFS) program funded under the Crime Act. Grants would require prisons to demonstrate new production methods, target new portions of their inmate populations, support some new part of their prison needs through internal production, develop restorative justice enterprises for nearby communities or try new marketing approaches.

As in Model Prisons, experiments would contain on-site analysis and evaluation to review progress, identify technical assistance needs and document results. As in its CLEFS program, NIJ would host annual conferences to enhance efforts and exchanges of information.

NIJ would work with state correctional administrators to evaluate and document activities. However, these efforts would not be able to answer more fundamental questions about the underlying merits of work, per se. Advocates of work in prisons suggest that working inmates are easier to manage and more likely to be employed after release. NIJ proposes to test these assertions during the life of the program. The Institute also would conduct long-term studies to examine two important policy questions:

Figure 1

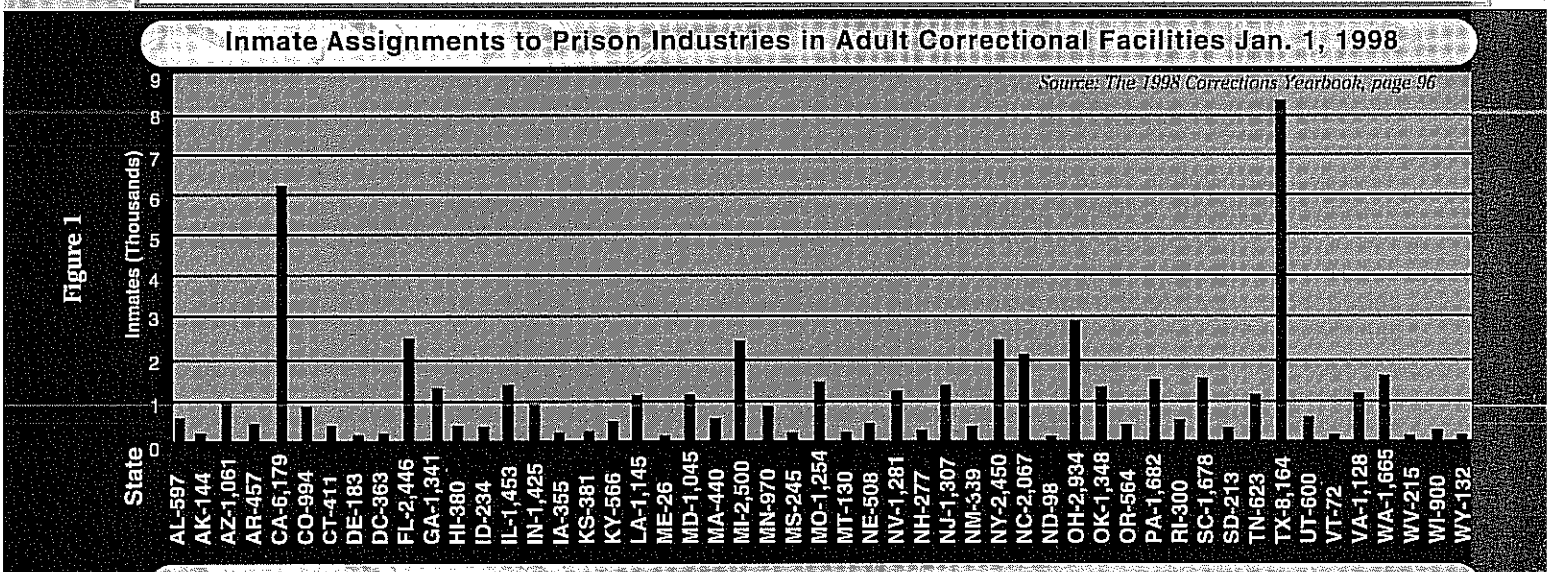
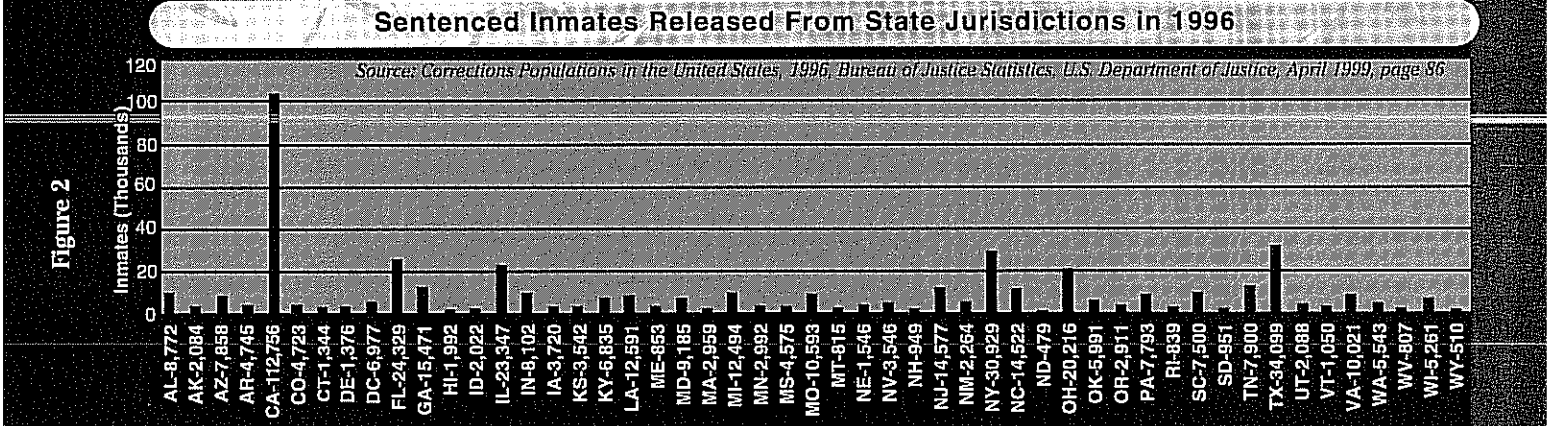


Figure 2



- How does increased prison employment affect the structural and behavioral climates within prisons?
- Do inmates who participate in full-time work within prisons perform better than idle inmates after release?

Community Re-Entry

The vast majority of inmates return to society, many after years of separation from their families and communities. States returned nearly 479,000 inmates to communities in 1996, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (see Figure 2). The magnitude of these returns, coupled with their concentrations in poor urbanized areas, presents a significant safety challenge to lawmakers and community leaders.

This threat has been amplified and intensified by recent sentencing trends that diminish the control that states can exert on returning inmates. Elimination of parole offices translates into reductions of surveillance as well as transitional services. More determinate sentencing policies also reduce the lengths of potential involvement with returning inmates. Reduced transitional resources, caused in part by the sheer volume of inmates, exacerbate these policy shifts.

Presently, NIJ is working with police leaders, judges and corrections officials to fashion solutions to this large-scale re-entry by inmates. The efforts are evolving into two models: re-entry courts and re-entry police/corrections partnerships. Both efforts recognize an important new re-entry dimension caused by the volume of inmates released to the community. Re-entry has traditionally been approached by dealing with individuals. Given the re-entry volume, we now must consider how to deal with whole communities.

Re-Entry Courts Model. This model seeks to involve the authority of the courts in the oversight of returning inmates. Borrowing from the successful drug court philosophy, re-entry courts would be established in counties that experience or anticipate large numbers of inmates released to the community. Core elements of a re-entry court include the following:

- *Assessment and Planning.* The state correctional agency and, where available, parole agency, would work in consultation with the re-entry court to identify inmates scheduled for release under the auspices of the re-entry court, assess their needs and forge community linkages supportive of successful reintegration.
- *Active Oversight.* The re-entry court would see releasees frequently and review progress until the end of parole or other form of supervision.
- *Management of Supportive Services.* The court would marshal treatment, job training and housing services, among others.
- *Accountability to the Community.* A jurisdiction might consider creating a citizen advisory board to develop accountability mechanisms for successful re-entry of released inmates, possibly involving vic-

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tims and ongoing restitution orders as part of the process.

- *Graduated Sanctions.* The re-entry court should arrange for an array of relatively low- level sanctions that could be swiftly, predictably and universally applied. Return to prison would be reserved for new crimes or egregious violations.
- *Rewards for Success.* The court should use positive judicial reinforcement by serving as a public forum for encouraging pro-social behavior and for affirming the value of individual effort in earning the privilege of successful reintegration.

A re-entry court could take many forms. For example, a sentencing judge could retain jurisdiction over that portion of the sentence served while on parole, handling in essence a re-entry docket. Alternatively, a re-entry court could be established on a stand-alone basis, handling only re-entry cases originally sentenced by other judges.

Re-Entry Partnerships. Re-entry partnerships operate deeply within jurisdictions to work at the neighborhood level. The roots of re-entry partnerships are police/correctional partnerships, which have been successful in cities such as Boston and Indianapolis when operating between police and probation officers. Here, however, the connections are between police and institutional resources.

Partnering with the Corrections Program Office, the Community-Oriented Policing Services Office and the Executive Office for Weed and Seed, NIJ recently convened a meeting of several state correctional leaders to think through the issues and needs inherent in re-entry. The consensus reached by the end of the meeting was that successful re-entry requires a three-way partnership between police, neighborhood and corrections. Police would operate in a traditional role of surveillance, but they would operate under a community policing philosophy with community partners. Most significantly, they would work with correctional officers in identifying returning inmates prior to release and with parole or other community service officers after release.

Corrections officials involved in the program are considering ways to operate transitional programs by neighborhood. For many states, this presents a formidable task of scanning records to assess inmate returns by neighborhood, and then gathering inmates from multiple facilities into single transitional units. At that point, parole and other correctional officers would work with police and community leaders on re-entry problems such as work, housing and drug treatment. Such a partnership will involve more than just coordination. It will require that communities identify the aggregate needs of returning members and try to put appropriate programs in place. It will require that institutional managers devise and offer programs that complement community assets.

The good news from the corrections piece of the puzzle is that many fine programs now exist to meet certain offender needs. The Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (RSAT) program, with its emphasis on aftercare, prepares inmates for a drug-free re-entry. What remains is to marry RSAT graduations with community post-graduate services.

Regarding employment, NIJ has enjoyed a successful partnership with the National Institute of Corrections and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education in scanning for and publicizing some promising programs that help move offenders from prison-based employment and training to community jobs. Among them are the following:

- The Safer Foundation in Chicago is the nation's largest community-based provider of employment services for ex-offenders.
- Project RIO (Re-integration of Offenders) in Texas provides job placement services each year to thousands of parolees in every county of the state.
- The Corrections Clearinghouse, a partnership between the Washington State Department of Correction and the Employment Security Department, provides a continuum of services to prison inmates that begins with an employability assessment during incarceration and ends with job placement and ongoing assistance after employment.
- The Center for Employment Opportunities in New York City provides transitional employment services to ex-offenders immediately after release.

The bad news is that the communities to which inmates return are most likely to be jobless and impoverished. Moreover, they also may be lacking in community leadership. It is possible that high-impact communities will require additional infrastructure development in the form of assisted housing, shelters, public service jobs and treatment centers. We do not expect to find total solutions to the safety issues presented by large-scale re-entry in such communities, but re-entry partnerships can alleviate the stress by pointing out the needs of these communities to urban leaders and by marshaling other federal support resources from health, welfare and labor programs. Preliminary surveys of relevant federal programs indicate some possibilities of financial support for key inmate needs.

Some may wonder why corrections officials should engage in re-entry activities. Traditional correctional responsibilities for re-entry have been preparing the individual, to the extent that resources permit, through job training and placement, drug treatment and family counseling. Once the individual leaves the institution, responsibility shifts to police and other community services. However, safety is every criminal justice agency's problem. Rehabilitative services and transitional services were simply traditional ways for institutions to contribute to safety. The game has changed because of the massive numbers now returning every year. Corrections' responses must change too, or we will lose this game.

Jeremy Travis is director of the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view and findings contained in this article do not necessarily represent official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.