

Federal Initiatives Seek to Reduce Recidivism Rates

By Doris Wells and Jolene Hernon

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has been involved in the ongoing evaluation of two federal initiatives designed to reduce recidivism: the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) and the Second Chance Act (SCA). The following is a summary of the evidence NIJ has gathered about the impact of these two major initiatives.

SVORI Evaluation

Results indicate that the populations that were studied (moderate- to high-risk adult males, adult females and juvenile boys in prisons and jails across the U.S.), had high levels of need for reentry services and programs, including but not limited to: housing, case management and education. When researchers first analyzed the data, they found that SVORI programs had no discernible impact on rearrest and reincarceration for adult males, and no significant impact on reincarceration for adult women. Later reanalysis, however, found more promising results. When researchers analyzed data from a longer follow-up period of at least 56 months for the adults and 22 months for the juvenile sample, they found that participation in SVORI programs was associated with longer times before rearrest and fewer arrests after release for all participants. This indicates that reentry programming, such as SVORI, may have a long-term impact for offenders returning to their communities after they are released from incarceration.

A summary of results from the SVORI study can be found at www.nij.gov, keyword SVORI. An article about the longer-term, positive impact on women is available in *NIJ Journal No. 269*, "Improving Access for Services for Female Offenders Returning to the Community," by

Marie Garcia and Nancy Ritter. The article is available at www.nij.gov, keyword Improving Access.

SCA Evaluation

Building on the positive findings from the follow-up analysis of SVORI, NIJ has started a long-term investment in assessing the impact of SCA on offender reentry. NIJ and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) are investing approximately \$15 million to examine the impact of reentry programming on offender reentry and recidivism.

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In 2010, NIJ awarded a grant to conduct an evaluation of eight reentry courts (which receive funding from BJA). The evaluation is ongoing. This evaluation, which is being led by National Poverty Center Research, in collaboration with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International and the Center for Court Innovation, consists of three components — a process evaluation, impact evaluation and cost-effectiveness study.

The goal of the process evaluation is to document the policies, practices, community context and implementation barriers across all eight sites. Researchers will draw explicit comparisons between the reentry court model, as implemented at the sites, with the antecedent drug court model (specifying similarities, differences and adaptations in each policy domain). They will also examine reentry courts in the context of reentry programs and best practices.

The goal of the impact evaluation is to compare recidivism during and after offenders' participation in the reentry court programs. The evaluators are also looking at the impact of other factors — such as employment, substance abuse and housing options. Those who participate in the programs will be compared with a matched group of offenders who do not participate. The goal is to determine if reentry courts reduce rearrests, reconstructions and reincarceration; and if reentry courts reduce problems related to criminal behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, employment, housing, mental health and family relationships. The purpose of the impact evaluation is to also determine which specific reentry court practices, services and participant perceptions are associated with more positive outcomes.

The cost-effectiveness analysis will be conducted at seven sites, will estimate the cost of the program, and will determine if costs for treatment and other outcomes are lower for reentry court participants than their matched comparison groups. The SCA evaluation — as well as a multiyear, multisite evaluation of adult offender reentry demonstration projects — is funded by SCA, which seeks to improve outcomes, such as recidivism, for individuals returning to their communities.

Interim results for the SCA reentry court evaluation can be found at www.ncjrs.gov, keyword 241400. Interim results for the SCA adult offender reentry demonstration project evaluation will be published in late summer 2013. Final results for the evaluations are expected in fall 2014 and spring 2015, respectively.

Other Promising Ways to Reduce Recidivism

In addition to evaluating the impact of SVORI and the SCA initiatives, NIJ has awarded grants to study the effects of other programs to reduce recidivism. The following are two examples.

Evaluation of Hawaii Opportunity Probation With Enforcement (HOPE). Researchers evaluated a community supervision strategy for substance-abusing probationers, commonly known as HOPE. They found that participants had large reductions in positive drug tests and missed appointments. They were also significantly less likely to be rearrested during follow-up at three-, six- and 12-month intervals than probationers who were assigned to regular probation procedures.

HOPE began as a pilot program in Hawaii in October 2004 and has expanded to more than 1,500 participants — about one out of six felony probationers on Oahu. HOPE relies on a mandate to abstain from illicit drugs, which is backed by swift and certain sanctions and preceded by a clear and direct warning. It is distinct from drug courts in economizing on treatment and court resources (probationers appear before a judge only when a violation is detected).

To see if the Hawaii model could work elsewhere, NIJ funded RTI International and its partner, Pennsylvania State University, to replicate HOPE at four sites: Clackamas County, Ore.; Saline County, Ark.; Essex County, Mass.; and Tarrant County, Texas. Each site will have approximately 400 probationers that are randomly assigned to HOPE or probation-as-usual. Project results

are expected in spring 2015. Results from these evaluations, as well as the replication of the HOPE study, provide critical information on the types of programs that may work to reduce recidivism. For more information on HOPE, visit www.nij.gov, keyword Hawaii HOPE.

Assessing risk with statistical models. Another NIJ-funded study, described in the NIJ Update article in the July/August issue of *Corrections Today*, was completed through a researcher-practitioner partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia's Adult Probation and Parole Department. The study resulted in a tool that aims to forecast which offenders pose the largest risk of recidivating and committing serious crimes. The forecasts are used to classify and inform community supervision decisions. Learn more about Philadelphia's risk assessment tool at www.nij.gov, keyword Philadelphia.

Conclusion

The positive results from reentry programs such as SVORI and HOPE can have far-reaching effects in shaping reentry policies for correctional institutions that can help produce cost savings. Using methods proven to be effective in keeping offenders out of prison and helping them to become self-sufficient, productive members of the community could save correctional institutions millions of dollars in housing costs. Such cost savings would only increase if further long-range evaluations of these studies continue to produce positive results.

Doris Wells is a writer/editor at the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). Jolene Herson is the director of communications at NIJ.