



Lessons Learned from the Second Chance Act: Moving Forward to Strengthen Offender Reentry

Signed into law in April 2008, the Second Chance Act (SCA) aims to enhance public safety by breaking the cycle of criminal recidivism and improving outcomes for people returning from prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities. The SCA authorizes the awarding of federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide reentry services and programs, including employment and housing assistance, victim support, and substance abuse treatment. Additionally, SCA funds may be used to support general criminal justice system improvements.

What is NIJ's role?

Under the SCA, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) started funding offender reentry demonstration projects, and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) was directed to evaluate the effectiveness of BJA's projects.

Since the passage of this important legislation and in collaboration with BJA, NIJ has supported two rigorous, independent evaluations of SCA adult offender reentry demonstration projects.

What did we learn?

The two NIJ-supported evaluations, led by Social Policy Research Associates and RTI International, produced similar results. In general, and with a few exceptions, participation in an SCA program did not affect a range of reentry outcomes, for example, substance use and compliance with supervision. Participation in an SCA program did, however, increase access to and receipt of reentry services and programs for participants and improve partnerships with community agencies.

Importantly, participation in SCA programming did not significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism.¹

What does this all mean?

The provision of reentry programming, specifically SCA programs and services, remains a work in progress. Offender behavior and the reentry process are complex. Just as no two individuals are alike, neither are their needs.

The two NIJ-supported evaluations of SCA projects offer a snapshot into the real-world challenges of providing services and programs to

individuals returning to the community after incarceration. The SCA addresses these challenges by allowing sites to tailor their programs and services to the needs of participants in their local communities.

This diversity among programs may be valuable for observing what's working and what needs improvement, but it can also significantly complicate the evaluation process. Additionally, the NIJ-supported studies assess only the first subsample of adult offender reentry demonstration projects selected by BJA for SCA funding (14 sites).² Future evaluations with access to more data over a longer period of time may provide a clearer picture of the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts.

Where do we go from here?

Offender reentry remains at the forefront of empirical research and policy discussions. As the research, development, and evaluation agency of the Justice Department, NIJ will continue to support rigorous evaluations of promising reentry programs. Moving forward, the field of criminal justice should:

- Focus on reducing recidivism and setting realistic goals and expectations about successful reentry.
- Embrace and support innovative and data-driven approaches to offender reentry that will lay the foundation for change in the justice system.
- Continue to engage in and support rigorous evaluations of reentry programs that show promise in order to better understand what works and who is most likely to reenter successfully.
- Recognize the importance of reentry programming and policies in shaping long-term outcomes (i.e., desistance) and how this links to public safety and overall reductions in criminal behavior.

About The Evaluations

This information sheet is based on two grant reports: *Evaluation of Seven Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration Programs: Impact Findings at 30 Months* (Social Policy Research Associates, 2010-RY-BX-0003) and *Cross-Site Evaluation of the Bureau of Justice Assistance FY 2011 Second Chance Act Adult Offender Reentry Demonstration Projects* (RTI International, 2012-RY-BX-0001).

¹ As referenced here, key recidivism measures include rearrest, reincarceration, and reconviction.

² Since 2009, BJA has made iterative changes to the SCA reentry demonstration program.