



**Research to Practice:  
Developing a Research Agenda**

**May 21, 2003**

**Meeting Summary**

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Research to Practice Meeting  
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## INTRODUCTION

On May 21, 2003, the National H.I.R.E. Network brought together some of the country's most innovative practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to share ideas about how to strengthen programs that seek to improve the labor market outcomes of people who have criminal records. Over the previous two days, a number of the participants had either participated in or observed the Urban Institute's Reentry Roundtable on Employment, a productive meeting that focused on the employment challenges and opportunities facing people with criminal histories. The H.I.R.E. Network's Research to Practice meeting gave participants the chance to further unravel some of the challenging questions and problems put forward during the Urban Institute's Roundtable, and also offered participants a unique opportunity to focus on the ways in which research and practice interact.

The group set out to accomplish two main goals: to formulate a research agenda that would help researchers and service providers measure employment program impacts; and to identify ways to use research results for the promotion of workforce development strategies and policies for people who have served time in prison. While they often face questions about research methodology, data, and interpretation of evidence on their own, researchers and practitioners seldom exchange ideas and knowledge about their respective practices. The National H.I.R.E. Network's Research to Practice meeting helped researchers, practitioners, and policymakers begin to establish the common language and goals necessary to conduct meaningful research on the impacts employment and employment programs have on clients who have criminal records, and their families and communities.

Two highly esteemed members of the H.I.R.E. Network's Advisory Board facilitated the discussion: Mindy Tarlow, the Executive Director of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), an organization that provides employment services to people with criminal histories, and Harry Holzer, a professor at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute. The two facilitators used their expertise to direct a conversation that delved into topics many of the participating researchers and practitioners had never before had the opportunity to discuss across fields. The meeting was organized by the National H.I.R.E. Network's Co-Directors, Debbie Mukamal and John Jeffries.

A number of questions drove the day's discussion: How do we distinguish between outcomes and program impacts? What kind of data do researchers need from practitioners? What survey and administrative data are available? What kind of

information would help practitioners improve their programs? Are there disciplines outside the workforce development and criminal justice fields that we can look to for research methodologies and program models? How do other systems affect outcomes? And how can we translate research results into information that will resonate with policy makers and the public?

This document summarizes the meeting participants' answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup> The summary also details participants' suggestions as to how the National H.I.R.E. Network can both address the needs of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, and assist each field in its efforts to improve employment prospects for people who have criminal records.

### **CLIENT PROFILES: WHOM TO HELP**

Ex-offenders<sup>2</sup> are a diverse group with diverse needs. Not only are violent offenders different from drug offenders, but people returning to urban communities face different challenges than people returning to suburban or rural communities. For example, while people convicted of drug-related crimes might change jobs frequently after release, sex offenders tend to stay in one job so that they do not have to repeatedly disclose their criminal histories. Each of these various groups—from those with job skills to those without, from those convicted of drug offenses to those convicted of violent crimes, from those with family obligations to those without—require different employment intervention strategies: GEDs will make a difference for some people, mentoring will make a difference for other people, work will be a motivator for others, and a client's age and gender significantly influence the impact of any given intervention.

Rather than providing the same services for all clients, researchers and practitioners must treat each client as an individual; they need to consider individuals' particular characteristics and circumstances as they work to determine which interventions are most effective and why. Practitioners also face the challenges of choosing whom to serve and how to serve them; and researchers face the challenges of deciding how to

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<sup>1</sup> Attendees' names are listed in the appendix.

<sup>2</sup> The terms "ex-offenders" and "former prisoners" are used here and elsewhere in this document in the interest of brevity. These terms are used with the full understanding that people who have criminal records (many of whom have never been incarcerated) are far more than their criminal histories and should not be identified by their status as former offenders, and with the acknowledgement that programs that serve people with criminal records often serve other disadvantaged populations as well.

control and account for subjects' various characteristics, and programs' various approaches.

### **INDICATORS AND INDIVIDUAL OUTCOMES: WHAT ARE WE MEASURING AND WHY?**

Most researchers and practitioners who work in the reentry field believe that employment can reduce recidivism and improve reentry outcomes for people who have been involved in the criminal justice system. But neither researchers nor practitioners have reached a consensus on which criteria—job attainment, job retention, or conviction history, among many other possible measures—most accurately predict chances for the long-term success of people who have criminal records. Available data does not yet conclusively tell us which strategies work. One of the first issues participants in the Research to Practice meeting discussed was which characteristics service providers should focus on in order to have the greatest impact on individual outcomes—and which characteristics researchers should measure in order to determine whether a person has successfully adapted to life outside of prison. Are there predictors, and if so, how might they be evaluated?

#### **Job Retention**

Within the reentry field the “getting a job vs. keeping a job” debate looms large. Labor market literature tends to emphasize job quality and/or the circumstances that appear to be responsible for attaining (or losing) a job; but in the field, job retention and strong labor force attachment more broadly have become even more important. Getting a job and staying in it can lead to the development of networks that lead, in turn, to new opportunities. In fact, labor force attachment and retention—that is, maintaining employment in one job *or* in a number of jobs over time—might be even more important than job retention. Because it is difficult to retain jobs in the secondary labor market—the market in which people with criminal histories are most likely to find employment—employment retention might very well be the most important outcome measure.

The group agreed that employment retention—as opposed to job attainment—is critical to successful reentry, and that further research on employment retention would help both practitioners and researchers understand what practices employment programs need to develop in order to help clients maintain employment.

While there is a great need for research on job and employment retention in general—and research on job and employment retention among people with criminal records in

particular—there is some evidence to show that job retention is predictable. The Vera Institute of Justice conducted a study that looked at what factors predicted whether clients at CEO would keep a job for over 100 days. The study found that no characteristic—neither age, nor substance abuse history, nor time served—was as significant a determining factor as clients' attendance in transitional employment. The closer to 100% a client's attendance in transitional employment was found to be, the greater the chance the client would keep permanent employment for longer than 100 days. Likewise, during a recent strategic planning study, the SAFER Foundation reviewed the profiles of its clients and found that previous work history was the only characteristic that distinguished those clients who successfully transitioned from those who had difficulty adjusting to life after prison. Furthermore, while it is a relatively new outcome measurement, service providers are being held accountable for their clients' ability to retain jobs.

A participant who works in the workforce development field observed that job retention is only part of the equation. Earnings may be a better measure of success than retention alone. On the other hand, wages and earnings might be variables of retention. Perhaps retention, wages, and job quality all interact to affect employment success. Ultimately, a combination of retention and wages over time is the ultimate objective.<sup>3</sup> One participant suggested that the paradigm be expanded to include the idea that programs must also be concerned with minimizing the frequency and duration of unemployment spells and other periods when clients were not gainfully employed.

### **Recidivism, Re-incarceration, and the Reentry Process**

The group also discussed recidivism both as an indicator and as a clear barrier to reentry and employment success. In deference to the criminologists in attendance, the consensus was that high-rate offenders—those who have committed a relatively high number of crimes in the past—are obviously more likely to recidivate than offenders who have committed fewer crimes. It was also suggested that the term "recidivism" receive greater scrutiny. While many people use the term to refer to re-arrest, meeting participants suggested that the term refer instead to re-incarceration. Regardless, it remains difficult to predict who will desist from crime and who will not. Some people

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<sup>3</sup> It was noted that wage growth rates are much flatter for people who have been to prison than it is for people who have not. The jobs people find post- prison rarely offer sustained earnings increases over time; the opposite is usually the case—more frequent involuntary and voluntary unemployment coupled with job turnover when employed severely compromise wage growth. Unskilled and low skill job seekers and workers, even those who do not have a criminal record, are also vulnerable to this trend.

desist even after high rates of offending; literature suggests that it is “about the individual.”

We may not know how to affect the individual, but we know that we need to focus on behavior that will lead from one step in a successful reentry process to the next. If a group of former prisoners is followed over ten years with the understanding that re-arrest is a form of recidivism, recidivism rates will probably be about 80 percent. But if, on the other hand, we think of desistance as a process, then recidivism can be determined by the change in the rate of offending—in other words, the number of crimes committed—over time. Research shows that the offending rate for adult males declines over time. Committing fewer—rather than zero—crimes is really part of the process that leads to complete desistance.

### **Motivation and Attitude**

Motivation and attitude were also discussed as promising indicators. While almost all participants were sure that the desire to succeed and the interpersonal skills that support that desire are crucial to reentry and employment success, none were quite sure how these qualities could be developed or measured. CEO is trying to reinforce positive behaviors through cognitive skills training; this is a service no funder pays CEO to administer. Researchers, practitioners, and funders are caught in a deadlock: in order to develop service models that successfully address motivation and attitude, programs require research that shows both how motivation has an effect on employability and what types of motivation-focused interventions work best; they also require the funding to support research and practice on motivation and attitude. Funders, in turn, require evidence of the success of interventions that focus on motivation and attitude before they can support such practices.

### **Defining Success**

It is difficult to determine what success means. Thirty days of employment might mean success in certain ways. But how does a program director use that benchmark to show that his or her program has an impact on individuals? We might think about success in terms of length of employment, but politicians and the public might have thoroughly different ideas about success. How much do statistics really matter in this political environment? Statistics do not change the fact that everyone is not in the same boat—substance abuse, mental illness, and other problems make it difficult to address employment. On the other hand, statistics and evidence do matter when people in positions of power and influence look to discredit or de-fund programs, especially within

political environments where “fiscal accountability” and “tough on crime” are dominant, popular themes.

Success might also be tied to factors that are seemingly outside the realm of employment and employment statistics. Without trivializing the importance of employment, responsible fatherhood, for example, can also be a source of self-esteem and a potential motivator to desist from criminal behavior. Programs might be shooting themselves in the foot if they tie success to work alone. In addition to helping male former prisoners find employment, we might also help them become better, more responsible fathers, good partners, and more involved citizens in their communities.<sup>4</sup>

### **Reentry and Employment as Processes**

Just as desistance is a process, finding and keeping a job are developmental processes—processes that do not seem to be addressed in literature on reentry and employment. If you think about your own process—how you entered the market place and started your own job—it is clear to see that a job is something you acquire after finishing school and training. Just as you evolve over time, and just as the contacts you have developed have guided you through your career, people with criminal records are also engaged in job and career development processes.

The benchmarks of workforce development—skill development, job interviews, rejection, job offer, job attainment, and job retention—might help practitioners and researchers predict success and track individuals’ improvement along a continuum. The drug relapse prevention field uses benchmarks to evaluate impacts and increase the chances of clients’ improvement. The drug treatment field considers relapse to be a legitimate step in the treatment and developmental processes. In fact, the employment research community might be able to learn about tracking job retention by studying drug relapse prevention research methodologies. Is job loss a step along the way to job gain?

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in an economy where, all other things being equal, black/white unemployment ratios are roughly two to one across all stages of the business cycle, it is conceivable that programs for former prisoners generating more capable, emotionally present, and responsible fathers would be preferred and considered successful. At a minimum, they might be considered successful compared to programs generating potentially employable fathers who, through no fault of their own, ultimately become unemployed due to structural labor market inefficiencies, and find themselves without a job or the skill sets imparted by well run responsible fatherhood programs.

## **Risk Assessment**

Conversation about indicators prompted remarks on risk assessment. There is error throughout the distribution of risk outcome findings. Undue attention to risk assessment could put programs in a vulnerable position. In fact, risk assessment raises more problems for policy than it solves. Rather than determine who is most likely to succeed and focusing only on those clients, programs might consider putting their efforts into populations with the highest failure rates.

## **DATA: AVAILABILITY, PROCESSES, AND NEEDS**

While most participants agreed that motivation, job retention, and other potential indicators require further research, a number of participants wondered how existing data and information might help researchers and practitioners answer questions regarding how to develop and evaluate reentry employment programs.

## **Data Sources**

Although it seems to be a new area of inquiry for people who study reentry, job retention has been an issue in employment training for the past thirty years. Some researchers look at retention rates as a standard of program performance. They use information on job retention to evaluate programs and monitor the extent to which programs have influenced clients' job retention success. Other researchers look at retention as an outcome for individuals; these researchers are more interested in clients and the various factors and characteristics that contribute to job retention success. Each group uses various methods and sources to collect information on job retention.

In the 1970s, it was expected that 85% of job placements would last thirty days or longer. Researchers arrived at that length of time by examining turnover rates for the workforce in general: analysis showed that retention at 30 days was as good a predictor as retention in the same job at 60 days, 90 days, and one year. The Department of Labor found that the marginal improvement in accuracy gained by following people for 60 or 90 days was not significant enough to justify tracking people for longer periods of time.

Beginning in 1974, many programs began conducting monthly follow-ups on their clients—some up to one, two, or three years. Programs that were either focused on clients' various needs or provided comprehensive case management sometimes

contacted clients directly, as these clients were already being tracked. Employment programs, on the other hand, were more likely to conduct employer surveys.

As evaluation became more sophisticated, researchers used quarterly employment and earnings records from the unemployment insurance (UI) system to measure employment rates at both the agency and individual levels. Whether researchers are surveying individuals or employers, arriving at an accurate measure of employment is not without its methodological compromises. Because it provides uniform information across programs, UI data is currently a popular measuring tool. But programs continue to collect employment data in a number of ways; many still conduct 30-, 60-, 90-day, or yearly follow-ups.

However, unemployment insurance data for ex-offenders is often unavailable—the insurance coverage rate is relatively low in the secondary and casual labor markets where people with criminal records are most likely to find work.<sup>5</sup> About 30% of former prisoners show up with employment in any given quarter; if casual employment were to be included, rates would be in the 50–60% range. Because ex-offenders do not always appear in UI data, programs that perform comprehensive case management—that is, programs that do not necessarily serve former prisoners alone—often conduct their own follow-up. Companies that employ 10 or fewer employees are legally exempt from paying; companies that pay their employees under the table simply will not appear in employment insurance data. Small companies and companies that pay off the books are often the very companies most willing to hire people with criminal histories. UI data has other limitations as well: for example, the data does not reveal hourly wage, hours worked, or quarterly earnings.<sup>6</sup>

The group offered a number of suggestions as to how solve problems with UI data. Adequate funding permitting, researchers expressed a strong interest in collecting both UI data and conducting follow-up surveys with clients. Most people are released onto parole after prison and employment is usually one of the conditions imposed by parole departments. The criminal justice system might have wage data on ex-offenders—parolees are required to show pay stubs to their parole officers. A number of meeting participants agreed that the easiest way to collect wage data would be to go to program participants for pay stubs. One practitioner mentioned a policy at his program

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<sup>5</sup> One participant reported that only 80-85% of all jobs in the economy show up in unemployment insurance data.

<sup>6</sup> Washington State is the only state in which hours worked appears in unemployment insurance data.

that requires clients to acquire jobs that deduct taxes from wages. Most employers use electronic payroll systems that automatically deduct taxes from employees' pay—this is another data source option. Still, confidentiality and privacy issues make it difficult for even state agencies to have access to wage data. Some states require research review board approval before the data is released. In these cases, once a researcher has a research sample and review board approval, he or she can acquire access to social security numbers, and then request a match from the UI system to obtain wage histories. In order to do surveys, researchers have to work with the programs from which they are drawing samples.

Participants mentioned other ways to match people returning from prison to wage data. Between 1994 and 1997, the Bureau of Justice Statistics gathered profiles on 38,000 people for a recidivism study. The subjects' social security numbers could be linked to their unemployment insurance records. This might be possible if a federal agency—the Department of Justice, for example—were to request access to the subjects' social security numbers and UI data. The Department of Health and Human Services also maintains a new hire database through the Federal Department of Labor Statistics; the database is part of a new requirement to record child support enforcement data. The file contains quarterly wage data from every state. But again, the information is highly guarded.

Participants mentioned other potential data sources as well: researchers can sign up to be temporary Census Bureau employees and acquire access to new Longitudinal Household Data sets; and William Sabol, a Case Western University researcher, has extensive experience matching administrative records. He is in the process of linking everyone who left prison in 2000 – 2001 to wage data records.<sup>7</sup>

There are also opportunities to reevaluate existing research. For instance, a 1970s study on supported work showed that such programs do not help ex-offenders. A reanalysis of the same data showed that supported work programs work well for older ex-offenders.

While opportunities for access to existing data clearly exists, practitioners at the meeting expressed a need for new data on recidivism and other types of information that will help them convince employers and housing officials that former prisoners pose

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<sup>7</sup> William Sabol was scheduled to attend the Research to Practice meeting, but had to cancel.

much less of a risk than most people assume.<sup>8</sup> Practitioners and researchers also expressed the need to compile, organize, and evaluate new and existing data on both individuals and programs.

### **Data and Operations Management**

Service providers themselves might be able to generate useful data. Most managers use MIS systems—it would make sense to use MIS systems to record the kinds of data that evaluators need or might need years from now as part of programs' daily management practices. A core set of data items—basic demographics, intake date, work history, contact information, date of birth, and so on—could be useful for both program managers and researchers. The data researchers need for evaluation results are often the same data that practitioners need to track program performance and to perform case management: research need not always involve outside researchers spending 10 years with a program.

Researchers develop data systems using ACCESS, Excel, or FIND; these are adaptable systems. Whoever is developing a given MIS system has the capability to add space to both record and link wages and other information. Collaboration during the program development stage would help researchers and practitioners address their most crucial information requirements. Facilitated meetings involving researchers, program managers, and MIS system developers would establish client and program management data needs early on, and assist in the development of MIS systems that respond to those needs.

### **EVALUATION: INDIVIDUALS, PROGRAMS, AND SYSTEMS**

The group was also interested in learning more about how programs and systems impact individuals, and how to evaluate interventions. They discussed approaches to all three levels of evaluation: individuals, programs, and systems.

### **Researcher Approaches vs. Practitioner Approaches**

Researchers tend to ask narrower questions than practitioners. Rather than account for all the characteristics that might make ex-offenders different from everyone else, a researcher would rather extract differences and focus on specific characteristics.

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<sup>8</sup> Shawn Bushway, a researcher from the University of Maryland, said that he has data that shows recidivism rates to be at fifty percent one year after release. Smaller samples of people have been followed for longer periods of time.

Researchers want an evaluation design that does not require them to have a theory about unobserved heterogeneity. Practitioners, on the other hand, are in the field of dealing with unobserved heterogeneity—they need descriptive evidence that accounts for differences between the clients they serve. One of the implications of these contrasts in perspective is that researchers might need to think differently about the research products they produce. Their field requires that researchers use experimental designs through which they can study both treatment and control groups; experimental designs and random assignment are unspoken mandates among researchers. But due to constraints imposed by funders, these methods might not be practical for practitioners. Researchers might not normally produce descriptive evidence, but such information could be more useful for practitioners than focused research that avoids unobserved heterogeneity.

Whereas researchers are generally more interested in quantitative data, both program directors and program employees tend to have more interest in qualitative data and the lives of the individuals they serve. One practitioner mentioned that, in addition to qualitative information about her clients, she is also interested in what the reentry process is like for people who do not connect with employment intermediaries once they leave prison.

### **Research on Individual Outcomes**

Different practitioners and researchers attach different levels of importance to education, drug treatment, and employment as they try to determine what might help former prisoners transition to life outside of prison. Having had his own difficulties determining how to develop programming to address some of the health and behavioral issues former prisoners face, one practitioner at the meeting wondered how researchers weigh addiction, anger management, or violence and similar issues as they evaluate programs. He said he had known clients who were excellent employees but who also physically abused their partners. He asked the group how to address issues like violent behavior in conjunction with employment.

Former prisoners' problems are not necessarily unique to former prisoners. The outcomes ex-offenders experience in the labor market are the result of an interaction between demand and supply. It could be that there is something unique about the way the demand side—an employer—responds to the ex-offender status. Perhaps there is something we are not doing for people with criminal records—or perhaps there is something we are not doing for employers. In other words, it might help to map demand-side nuances and rethink demand-side strategies.

While former prisoners' problems are not unique to former prisoners, prisons are not benign places; people are different after they leave prison. Other populations experience different types of trauma, but this population's experience is exceptional. Intermediaries are faced with the implications of those differences—and they are frequently devoid of any expertise or informed approaches sophisticated enough to address those issues.

Researchers had a number of questions about the reentry population: What is the effect of post-release supervision? What is the effect of civil disability or barred entry into certain licensed occupations? What is the effect of legal obligations such as uncleared warrants and child support? Do all these things speak specifically to this population? One researcher noted that motivational issues show up in other populations as well, and that youth programs also have difficulty demonstrating impacts.

A number of practitioners expressed interest in strengths-based assessments—assessments that focus on clients' strengths and ambitions regardless of a program's interests. They are expensive and time-consuming, but strengths-based assessments allow service providers to identify clients' goals and facilitate subsequent conversations about why or why not those goals were reached. Assessment tools themselves might reinforce dependence and institutionalization. Research instruments and program practices should demonstrate both respect for clients and acknowledgement of what it means to put people through endless hours of intrusive tests.

### **Program Evaluation and Implementation Analysis**

Data can be used not only to evaluate individuals' progress and outcomes, but also to evaluate programs. It is important to differentiate between individual outcomes that programs track in order to secure funding, and impacts researched in order to evaluate and improve programs. As new ideas push us to think about and implement new approaches, researchers must not only find new ways to evaluate these innovative approaches, but they must take risks as well. For example, even if job retention does not seem to be the most politically viable measure, it should be measured if studying programs' impact on job retention could result in program improvements, and, eventually, increased labor force attachment among people with criminal records.

Cost effectiveness, cost efficiency, and program impact relative to cost appeal to most policy makers and funders. As Peter Cove, president of America Works, mentioned during the Urban Institute's Reentry Roundtable meeting on prison-to-work issues,

welfare policy has taught us not to focus on training to the exclusion of work first. In a world of limited resources, that idea is interesting for programs looking to spend money and develop interventions in the programmatic areas that matter most.

Researchers might also look more closely at implementation analysis. Rather than simply examine individual outcomes and program impacts, researchers and practitioners can incorporate broad programmatic measures and policy contexts into their evaluations. They can look at the sequencing of program components that might lead to retention to better understand how reentry components fit together.

Implementation analysis began in defense policy in the 1960s: the Cuban missile crisis demonstrated the ways in which policy is translated into operations. Similar implementation issues exist in environmental policy, welfare policy, and policing. When researchers go out in the field, they have conceptual frameworks—management theories, policy objectives, and institutional framework—that they apply when evaluating data. Implementation analysis is a systematic way to gather qualitative information about programs and policies.

Different programs perform different types of treatments and assessments. Data is needed not only on the background characteristics and trajectories of the people being served, but also on the various services clients receive. If a program evaluates only its own program elements and there is no variation in those practices, then there will be little to learn from evaluation.

### **Systems Analysis**

Systems analysis examines resource issues and program entrepreneurship. In the reentry field, systems analysis assumes there are overlapping populations across systems, and examines ways to blend limited funding streams to meet the individual needs of clients whether they are former prisoners or part of the larger disadvantaged population.<sup>9</sup> It tracks the interaction between multiple barriers to reentry success: mental health, substance abuse, learning disabilities, criminal justice, and so on. For example, in New York City, Workforce Investment Act funding and resources available for former prisoners are combined in the Human Resources Administration.

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<sup>9</sup> One participant informed the group that about 60% of the clients at the Mott Foundation's Fathers at Work Initiative are ex-offenders. The Contra Costa County, California Father's at Work site has made major accommodations in child support enforcement, making it possible for many young ex-offenders to enter the workforce.

Still, every part of each system cannot be researched independently. A larger body of integrated knowledge is required: it is important to research both individuals and systems.

### **CONNECTIONS: TAKING OTHER SYSTEMS INTO ACCOUNT**

As mentioned during the discussion on systems analysis, people with criminal records are often connected to a number of systems and interventions. These can include the criminal justice, workforce development, health, housing, and child support enforcement systems, along with drug and other treatment programs. Participants in the Research to Practice Meeting discussed the impacts other systems and programs have on employment interventions and the clients such interventions serve. The group also discussed the competing demands different systems place on individuals, as well as the ways in which systems might assist clients—and each other—by exchanging information and data.

#### **Prison: Environments and Interventions**

The tremendous expansion of the criminal justice system over the last 25 years has had a negative effect on employment, wages, and family structure. It could be that time in prison decreases the productivity of workers—it certainly compromises family involvement. Rather than leave prisoners with fewer post-release prospects, prisons should be the starting point for reentry. Collaboration between prisons, reentry services, and workforce development agencies could help connect prisoners to jobs, training, and employment services before release and enhance post-release chances for reentry success.

One practitioner told the group that her program develops three- to four-year relationships with clients before they leave prison. Preparation for release and the knowledge that someone will provide assistance when a client leaves prison helps prepare that client for reentry. In Vermont, a former labor commissioner has become the commissioner of corrections—he is interested in ways to connect workforce development and corrections. Due to the commissioner's interests and approach, workforce development culture is going to be developed in two new Vermont correctional facilities.<sup>10</sup> If changing prison culture works in Vermont, other states might be able to replicate the process. Just as one state might learn from another, reentry and employment programs might learn from efforts in related areas—drug courts, for example.

## **Varying Processes**

Little is known about the various reentry processes at work across the country. Even where there are federal guidelines prescribing the implementation of legislation such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), each of the 50 states implements federally funded programming in different ways. One researcher mentioned having been at a meeting at which a group of researchers was putting together a survey on recidivism. The research sponsor did not want to release state data because it could be used to rank states' recidivism rates.

## **Systems' Roles**

Together, each system—from criminal justice to housing to workforce development—plays a role in a process in which both clients and practitioners participate. Researchers are also implicated—mapping these systems could help determine how they are all connected. What role does each play in the reentry process? There are some things that prisons might do well, and there are others that post-release programs might do well. Which system should be responsible for each step in the reentry process?

## **POLICY: TRANSLATING EVIDENCE**

The Research to Practice group also discussed how to design and use research to impact policy. While it was agreed that evidence matters, a number of participants put forth the idea that evidence matters less in issues pertaining to former prisoners than it does in other policy areas. To the extent that evidence does matter, researchers and practitioners need to pay particular attention to the way they frame findings for policy makers and the public.

## **Cost Efficiency**

Discussion about research can be put in the hyper-political context of budgets and funding. While research tends not to advance changes in corrections policy, fiscal crises could encourage the use of research and data. Legislators and governors are now forced to think about issues they would never otherwise consider. But very few of the appropriations and budget committee chairs who will make corrections policy decisions over the next few years will ever have read a corrections journal or encountered corrections research of any kind. They will need distilled versions of research results that offer ways to reduce budgets. Lower recidivism rates mean considerable savings to states; rather than explicitly focus on what might help former

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<sup>10</sup> The National Institute of Corrections has documents available on how to change prison culture.

prisoners, research needs to emphasize opportunities for cost savings. If 90% of the people who return to prison are unemployed, that data should be used strategically.

Practitioners and researchers also need to develop political strategies that focus on recidivism. Researchers should, of course, design evaluations in ways that make most sense—but they should also develop the ability to speak the language of people who are responsible for making decisions. Policy makers are not as concerned about retention rates and wages as they are about public safety and recidivism. Interventions are clearly the right things to do—but a program needs to be able to say that its intervention helps keep people out of prison whether by reducing the occurrence of technical violations or lowering the rate of new crimes. Policy makers should be thought of as customers: if recidivism is the product, that product should be packaged and marketed aggressively. However a program is designed and whatever research is pursued, results should show that a given program results in fewer people returning to prison. The emphasis of research results must be on increasing public safety and saving money.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The goal of the National H.I.R.E. Network is to increase the number and quality of job opportunities available to people with criminal records by enhancing employment and research practices, and changing both public policies and public opinion. With its network of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, the H.I.R.E. Network is also well-equipped to provide training and technical assistance to agencies working to improve employment prospects for people with criminal records.

At the close of the Research to Practice meeting, each participant offered thoughts on the methods by which the National H.I.R.E. Network might help strengthen programs and improve reentry and employment outcomes for former prisoners. Researchers, service providers, and policy makers each had different—though sometimes overlapping—ideas about how to go about advancing research, programs, and policy. The following recommendations summarize participants' suggestions, as well as the H.I.R.E. Network's own ideas about how it can respond to the research and practice needs participants identified over the course of the meeting.

## **RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Interpret Existing Data**

It became clear over the course of the meeting that there are many rich data sources available that have not been used. Data interpretation, reanalysis, and evaluation were high on participants' request lists. Practitioners cannot be sure whether a given research study is either valid or significant—an evaluation of research itself would help them decide which results are valuable.

### **Commission Research**

The group identified a number of areas—motivation, program evaluation, operations management, systems analysis, resource allocation, labor market patterns of ex-offenders, and qualitative analysis—that require new research. If it were to develop the capacity to interpret existing data, the National H.I.R.E. Network would be well positioned to identify gaps in data and information on individuals, programs, and systems, and could commission research to fill those gaps.

### **Function as a Clearinghouse**

With so much data available, the amount of information on both employment and reentry can be overwhelming to practitioners who are looking to either explore and evaluate new program options, or find evidence that supports existing practices. A research clearinghouse could direct practitioners and researchers to the information best suited to their programmatic needs and interests.

## **PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Connect People from Different Systems**

Almost all the participants—researchers, service providers, and policy makers alike—talked about how useful it is to discuss the reentry population with people from different fields. As a number of participants mentioned during the meeting, the reentry population is connected to a number of institutions and systems that impact the reentry process. Groups of people representing various fields could examine the competing demands faced by people returning home from prison. What information might the criminal justice, child support enforcement, and workforce development fields share that might be useful to each of them? What works for other systems? How does corrections affect intermediaries? How do clients move through these various systems? The National H.I.R.E. Network is conversant in the language of workforce development, criminal justice, and other fields, and can leverage its access to these fields to facilitate

discussions on the roles of each of the various systems with which ex-offenders come in contact. Such meetings will facilitate partnership across fields.

### **Provide Opportunities for Peer Development**

Not only would it be useful for practitioners from different fields to exchange information about policies and processes, but people within the workforce development and reentry fields would benefit from the chance to learn about their peers' practices. Practitioners from any given discipline are more likely to listen to and use information from people who work in the same field. The National H.I.R.E. Network could convene small groups of workforce developers to address issues that are specific to the reentry population.

### **Provide Assistance to Jurisdictions**

With information from new and existing research as well as ideas from practitioners in the various fields implicated in the reentry process, the National H.I.R.E. Network could develop the capacity to assist jurisdictions in their efforts to help former prisoners find and keep employment. This could involve convening groups of various practitioners from specific jurisdictions, helping jurisdictions develop pilot projects, helping researchers and practitioners develop MIS systems that address both their needs, and troubleshooting existing reentry and employment practices.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Develop a Policy Agenda**

If they were carried out, each of the participants' recommendations could result in policy changes that enhance program impacts and individual outcomes. To this end, the National H.I.R.E. Network could produce position papers—the documents would distill research results in ways that resonate with people who formulate criminal justice and workforce development policies. As a number of participants noted, policy makers are looking for ways to reduce recidivism and save money. The National H.I.R.E. Network can make important contributions to the policy and funding decisions that will shape reentry and employment processes in the years to come.

**APPENDIX: ATTENDEES**

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