

Study shows inmate re-entry programs not evaluated optimally

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A recent study shows a government-funded program designed to help prisoners re-enter society and avoid returning to prison did not produce better results for those in the program when compared to those not taking part in the program. But a University of Kansas professor argues that it is not accurate to call such programs a failure and that those most interested in their outcomes are not asking the right questions to truly evaluate their effectiveness.

Margaret Severson, professor of social welfare at KU, co-authored “Prisoner Reentry Programming: Who Recidivates and When?” published in the *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*. The article, co-written by Kimberly Bruns, project coordinator, and Christopher Veeh, a graduate of KU’s School of [Social Welfare](#) and now a doctoral student at the University of Denver; and Jae Hoon Lee of the KU Center for Research Methods and Data Analysis, summarized a multi-year analysis of a prisoner re-entry program in Kansas. The study followed participants released from prison into one of three county-based re-entry programs and saw how many individuals had returned to prison 12, 18 and 24 months after release to the community. The numbers were evaluated against a comparison group of released offenders who did not take part in the re-entry program.

About 32 percent of individuals involved in the re-entry program and 25 percent of those who were not in the re-entry program returned to prison at some point; more commonly for a parole violation and less so (8 percent and 12 percent, respectively) for a new conviction. There were

more than 75 such programs in the country at one time, Severson said, yet there was very little published research that reported positive outcomes. Many of these programs are no longer funded because of tight state and federal budgets.

“This was a Kansas program designed to provide a combination of services,” Severson said of the program analyzed in the study. “It started in the prison with a point person being designated to help returning offenders secure education, social services such as job training and housing, mental health and/or substance abuse treatment. There was a real focus on addressing participants’ risks and needs to support them in their efforts to live successfully in society.”

While the programs may be deemed unsuccessful by some simply based on recidivism rates, Severson said there needs to be more focus on other positive outcomes.

“In fact, most of those who returned did so for violations of their parole; a much smaller percent of those studied returned for new convictions. And, it is too early to say the program didn’t work. When the participants were in the community, did they contribute to the economy? Did they pay taxes? Did they provide support for their families? Did they adequately parent their children? Those are the important questions we should ask and answer,” Severson said.

Other problems with standard evaluations of the re-entry programs exist as well. For example, the same outcomes are measured for all participants regardless of the crimes they were originally imprisoned for. Women, for example, are frequently incarcerated for economically motivated crimes – actions taken to support their families and that may also support unhealthy habits developed perhaps as a consequence of their involvement in abusive relationships and as an aftermath of the experience of trauma. Only a fraction of the prison population is female

and eligible for re-entry services, Severson said, and while these women have similar service needs, they also have very different needs than do men. If those specific needs are addressed, how might women's recidivism outcomes improve?

Focusing strictly on any particular number doesn't give a full picture of what's happening in re-entry programs, and further research into the positive aspects of such programs could help in the design of more effective interventions and help ensure federal, state and local funds spent on such programs are targeted effectively. More than 600,000 inmates are released each year in the United States, and there remains significant social interest in making sure they are ready to rejoin society and not reoffend.

“Current fiscal (budgetary) and structural (facility capacity) realities suggest that the time is ripe to allow for reintegration efforts to continue to evolve and thus improve in their ability to yield gains in understanding what interventions work to interrupt the cycle of crime and what factors have the most effect on keeping communities safe,” the authors wrote.

Provided by University of Kansas

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