PRIORITY
Criminal Justice
NEEDS INITIATIVE
A project of the RAND Corporation, the Police Executive Research Forum, RTI International, and the University of Denver

Improving Employment Outcomes for the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Returning Citizens

Joe Russo, Samuel Peterson, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, Brian A. Jackson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Returning citizens, particularly those with a limited work history or who have been out of the labor market for several years, face significant and well-documented barriers to employment. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) provides incarcerated individuals with access to vocational and educational programming to help overcome some of these barriers, but many individuals still struggle to find formal employment at a sustainable wage on release. The average amount of time before individuals released from federal prison facilities find a formal job is more than six months, and, although 67 percent of individuals find employment at some point during the first four years after release, less than 40 percent are employed at any single point in time (Carson et al., 2021). Moreover, for those who do find employment, wages are often meager (Carson et al., 2021).

This report describes the ecosystem of federal reentry and employment support that returning citizens have access to; identifies areas for improvement; and provides some potential solutions for the BOP, community-based organizations, and interested employers to consider. The reentry and employment support ecosystem for returning citizens includes the institutional environment and available programming, prerelease efforts to prepare individuals for employment and connect them to employers, services available after individuals are transferred to BOP community custody, postrelease supervision, and postrelease connections to employers and community-based organizations. Each of these components may serve to support individuals in their transitions from incarceration to the community and may help them find and sustain meaningful employment. We conducted interviews and focus groups with subject-matter experts in each of these components, including experts with lived experience of being incarcerated in federal institutions.

What We Found

Workshop participants identified a variety of opportunities and recommendations for both the BOP and other organizations involved in reentry and postincarceration employment:

- The BOP is a large and complex organization with institutions, offices (one central office and six regional offices), and contract facilities spread across the United States. Participants noted that employment outcomes would be improved through sustained leadership focus on and commitment to an organizational culture that better supports incarcerated individuals and addresses their vocational and educational needs. Relatedly, the BOP must address persistent staff recruitment and retention deficiencies so that programming and service delivery can take place without interruption. Participants suggested considering strategies to leverage the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals (e.g., hiring vetted individuals to be peer navigators, relaxing barriers to volunteering in institutions) to improve employment outcomes.

The BOP is a large and complex organization. Employment outcomes would be improved through sustained leadership focus on and commitment to an organizational culture that better supports incarcerated individuals and addresses their vocational and educational needs.

- Preparing incarcerated individuals for employment on release begins in the institution. Participants made several recommendations to improve outcomes: start career planning, vocational or educational programming, and reentry preparation as early during incarceration as possible; prioritize providing resources to those most in need (e.g., individuals at higher risk of recidivism or with little to no employment history or education); ensure that vocational programs lead to marketable skills and that employers are aware of this talent pool; ensure that individuals have opportunities to develop digital literacy and have the documents that are required to work (e.g., identification, résumé) in hand prior to release. In addition, technology should be leveraged to connect incarcerated individuals with community-based organizations and employers prior to release.
- About 75 percent of incarcerated individuals are transitioned to a contracted residential reentry center (RRC), also known as a *halfway house*, prior to release from BOP custody. Employment outcomes could improve with greater capacity overall, as well as more RRCs in closer proximity to the communities that individuals are returning to. The BOP should examine policies that may create barriers to successful employment outcomes (e.g., the requirement to obtain full-time employment within 30 days of arrival at the RRC). A more tailored approach that allows individuals to pursue other options (e.g., education, part-time work) should be considered. RRCs provide a variety of services; however, some individuals may need additional support to obtain and sustain employment. There is a need to leverage community-based organizations and peer navigators to help individuals (e.g., via transportation or counseling) better manage the difficult transition back to society.
- The BOP is encouraged to track granular data on employment outcomes of releasees by vocational and educational program participation and other key metrics. These data can help the agency gain insight into which programs are correlated to successful outcomes and may inform program planning. Collaboration with RRCs and federal probation will be required to track outcomes once individuals return to the community. The BOP typically does not track people once they leave BOP custody, and gathering the data necessary to truly evaluate the effectiveness of employment programs is a challenge, but doing so was identified by participants as worthwhile.
- To mitigate the stigma of hiring formerly incarcerated individuals, *second-chance employers* (i.e., those that hire individuals with criminal records) are encouraged to share their success stories with their peers. To the extent possible, these employers are encouraged to gather and share data on employment outcomes to help demonstrate the value of tapping into this pool of talent.

Preparing incarcerated individuals for employment on release begins in the institution. One recommendation to help improve outcomes is to start career planning, vocational or educational programming, and reentry preparation as early during incarceration as possible.

INTRODUCTION

The National Institute of Justice, supported by the RAND Corporation in partnership with the University of Denver, hosted a virtual workshop at the request of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with improving employment outcomes among individuals released from the federal prison system. Formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly those who have been out of the labor market for several years, often struggle to obtain and maintain meaningful employment on release from prison. Some of these challenges are individual, but many are systemic. For example, low levels of education, limited work experience and marketable skills, a lack of documented identification, and a general reluctance among employers to hire formerly incarcerated individuals are all barriers to meaningful employment (Baer et al., 2006). Furthermore, the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction has identified nearly 30,000 examples of federal or state-imposed employment-related restrictions on people with criminal convictions (Umez and Gaines, 2021). An examination of persons released from federal prison in 2010 found that less than 40 percent of BOP releasees had been employed during a four-year period; it also found that the median quarterly earnings by the end of four years were $6,000 (Carson et al., 2021). Ultimately, the lack of employment opportunities can affect these individuals' ability to sustain themselves and their families, as well as their ability to desist from crime. RAND and the University of Denver convened a group of BOP administrators, community-based reentry service providers, researchers, national employers, and other experts to explore the issue of postrelease employment and identify areas of improvement to better prepare returning citizens for meaningful employment as a path to successful reentry.

The BOP is a federal law enforcement agency charged with protecting public safety. It accomplishes this not only by securely and safely housing individuals who are accused or convicted of federal crimes in correctional settings but also by providing programming and support to help ensure that individuals who are released successfully transition back into the community. As of this writing, approximately 159,000 individuals were in the custody and care of the agency, which operates 122 institutions (see Figure 1; BOP, 2023). More than 97 percent of these individuals will be released to the community at some point, and more than 35,000 individuals were released in 2021 (BOP, undated-c). Many of these individuals, however, will continue to be justice-involved. For example, the U.S. Sentencing Commission tracked individuals released from BOP custody in 2005. Over a five-year period, approximately 45 percent were rearrested, 26 percent were reconvicted, and 21 percent were reincarcerated (Hunt and Dumville, 2016).

Figure 1. Bureau of Prisons Ecosystem

Bureau of Prisons
- 159,000 inmates
- 122 institutions
- 35,000 released per year

Programming
- 200+ programs

Halfway houses
- Approximately 200 locations
- 75% of releasees

Probation
- 80% of releasees
- 3-year median

Employment (4 years postrelease)
- Less than 40% employed
- $6,000 quarterly median earnings

Recidivism (5 years postrelease)
- 45% rearrest
- 26% reconviction
- 21% reincarceration

SOURCES: Features information from Carson et al., 2021; Deloitte Development, 2016; Hunt and Dumville, 2016; Schmitt and Jeralds, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2016.

Given the high cost of incarceration,[1] the size of the federal prison population, and persistent recidivism, there has been an increased focus on correctional programming and reentry services to achieve better outcomes. For example, the First Step Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-391, 2018) requires the development and implementation of a risk and needs assessment system to guide placement of incarcerated individuals in recidivism-reducing programs to address their needs and reduce their risk of recidivism. Eligible individuals who participate in these programs may earn time credits toward their sentences as an incentive. However, it is important to note that such programs are voluntary, and, therefore, motivation is a critical factor.

Drawing on the results of risk and needs assessments, staff may recommend that individuals participate in relevant programs and services that address their criminogenic factors (e.g., antisocial cognition, antisocial associates, education, family reunification, substance use, mental health, and housing).[2]

Employment is an important area of need and the focus of the workshop. Research has demonstrated that employment is an influential predictor of successful reentry, and, although the relationship can be complicated, there is consistent evidence that employment increases the length of time between release and recidivism (Berg and Huebner, 2011; Tripodi, Kim, and Bender, 2010). Education during incarceration is also a critical factor (Duwe and Clark, 2014). Furthermore, employment represents not only financial stability but also a commitment and attachment to society (Mauldin, 2016). Employment can serve as a prosocial routine activity that allows individuals to contribute to and develop positive social ties with their communities.

Institutional Programming

The BOP supports a variety of programming designed to better prepare incarcerated individuals for employment opportunities on release.[3] For example, most individuals who are serving sentences are given institutional work assignments that allow them to gain work experience in such areas as food service, safety and sanitation, and groundskeeping.

Beyond institutional job assignments, eligible individuals may apply to participate in more-formal programming that is designed to prepare them to work in a particular field. While specific programming opportunities can vary by institution, individuals can access occupational training in a variety of areas, such as welding; building trades; culinary arts; heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC); and diesel mechanics. Programs range in rigor from apprenticeships (e.g., electricians, plumbers), which can lead to U.S. Department of Labor certification, to shorter-term courses in specific areas (e.g., forklift operations). In general, all programs can lead to an industry-recognized certification or credential of some sort.

The BOP program that is most directly responsible for many of these opportunities is UNICOR,[4] also known as Federal Prison Industries (FPI). Incarcerated individuals may gain job skills and work experience through participation in FPI, which is a wholly government-owned corporation whose mandate is to reduce recidivism by providing incarcerated individuals with employment and the job skills necessary for successful reentry. FPI operates in seven business segments: agribusiness, clothing and textiles, electronics, fleet, office furniture, recycling, and services (e.g., call centers, computer-aided design). FPI has operations at 63 factories and two farms located at 51 prison facilities (UNICOR, undated). Historically, most products and services were sold to other federal agencies, but the First Step Act and other initiatives now allow for expansion into other markets, including the private sector in some cases.[5] FPI is self-sustaining by law and, therefore, receives no appropriated funds. Revenues are put back into the program. FPI offers incarcerated individuals the opportunity to obtain certifications and skills in a wide array of areas (e.g., carpentry, welding, supply chain management, telephonic sales, computer-aided design, Lean Six Sigma, drafting).

As individuals near release, they may also have access to classes in such areas as résumé writing, navigating the job search, and interviewing. Some institutions hold mock job fairs for individuals to practice job interview skills; these fairs also provide employers with insight into the skills available among the returning citizen talent pool (U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Office [District of South Dakota] and Federal Bureau of Prisons, undated).

A variety of educational opportunities are available to incarcerated students. All BOP prison facilities offer literacy classes and English as a second language (ESL). Individuals who do not have high school diplomas or General Educational Development (GED) certificates must first participate in the literacy program for a minimum of 240 hours or until they obtain GEDs. Non-English-speaking individuals must take ESL (U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Office [District of South Dakota] and Federal Bureau of Prisons, undated).

Halfway Houses

The BOP contracts with more than 100 organizations to operate approximately 200 residential reentry centers (RRCs)—also known as *halfway houses*—across the United States (Deloitte Development, 2016).[6] After serving time in an institution, eligible individuals may be transferred to BOP community custody and placed in an RRC to help their transition to the community. Approximately 75 percent of individuals are placed in an RRC for a period of up to a year (GAO, 2016). The RRC is responsible for providing support in a variety of areas, such

ABBREVIATIONS

BOP	Federal Bureau of Prisons
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DOC	department of corrections
FPI	Federal Prison Industries
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
GED	General Educational Development
HVAC	heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning
RRC	residential reentry center
VR	virtual reality

as employability skills, assistance in obtaining identification and employment, housing, and behavioral health issues. While individuals reside in the RRC, they remain in the custody of the BOP until the confinement portion of the sentence has been satisfied. Therefore, they are accountable to the rules of the RRC. For example, residents are expected to work full-time and pay subsistence (i.e., rent). Furthermore, they may leave the facility only for approved activities, may not use substances, and may not engage in any activities that could undermine the safety and security of the facility. Serious rule violations could result in transfer back to an institution.

Supervised Release

Individuals sentenced to federal incarceration often must also serve a period of supervised release (i.e., probation) following release from the institution or RRC. Approximately 80 percent of individuals must serve a period of supervised release, and the median duration is three years (Schmitt and Jeralds, 2022). Individuals under supervised release are no longer in the custody of the BOP but rather are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services system, a component of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. That said, the supervised release period represents a critical time in the reentry process. U.S. probation officers not only monitor individuals in the community to make sure they comply with the court-ordered release conditions (e.g., find and maintain employment, obey the law) but also may direct them to supportive services, such as employment assistance, substance use or mental health treatment, and medical care, as needed.

Postrelease Employment Outcomes

Although data are scarce (and dated), it appears that formerly incarcerated individuals still struggle to gain employment, despite an increased focus on reentry programming, including vocational training. For example, a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics study tracked 51,500 individuals released from federal prison in 2010 over a four-year period (Carson et al., 2021). With *employment* defined as "formal work that results in at least $1 in earnings during a quarter" (Carson et al., 2021, p. 2), the following findings emerged:

- On average, it took more than six months for individuals to find their first formal jobs.
- Although 67 percent of individuals were employed at some point during the follow-up period, at no point was more than 40 percent of the total studied population simultaneously employed.
- For those who were employed, earnings were meager. Median earnings started at $3,500 in the first quarter following release and rose to over $6,000 by the last quarter of the follow-up period.

Other studies, which included formerly incarcerated individuals from both federal and state prisons, produced similar results. Looney and Turner (2018) report that only 55 percent of releasees have any reported earnings in the first year after release.

Clearly, there is ample opportunity to better prepare returning citizens for employment. Furthermore, societal factors are converging in a way that could improve outcomes. For example, as the U.S. economy continues to recover from the financial impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many employers are facing labor shortages, and the national unemployment rate has returned to the prepandemic low of around 3.6 percent. Employers appear to be increasingly willing to provide returning citizens with job opportunities. For example, a 2021 survey found that 53 percent of human resource professionals said they would be willing to hire people with criminal records—up from just 37 percent in 2018 (Goldberg, 2022). Employers also express satisfaction with job performance; 85 percent of human resource professionals expressed the belief that workers with criminal records perform just as well as or better in their jobs than workers without criminal records (Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Finally, several studies have shown that employees with criminal records are often more loyal, have higher retention rates, and have lower turnover rates (Krumrie, 2016; Minor, Persico, and Weiss, 2018; Paulk, 2016; Trone Private Sector and Education Advisory Council to the American Civil Liberties Union, 2017).

Considering these challenges and opportunities, we sought to understand how the BOP could leverage these factors to improve employment outcomes by better preparing returning citizens for work, connecting them to opportunities, and supporting them through the reentry process. There is evidence that employment-focused programming can both reduce recidivism and improve outcomes, such as employment, hours worked, and wages (McNeeley, 2022). Still, other research has shown that individual characteristics, such as race, gender, age, and education, can play a key role in employability and outcomes for people returning from prison (Cobbina, Huebner, and Berg, 2012; Kolbeck, Bellair, and Lopez, 2022; Wang, Mears, and Bales, 2010). For instance, only 23.5 percent of

Black federal prisoners were employed one year before their admission to prison, relative to 36.3 percent of White federal prisoners and 35.8 percent of Hispanic federal prisoners, according to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report on persons released from federal prison in 2010 (Carson et al., 2021). Black federal prisoners also made less money than their White or Hispanic counterparts before admission to prison. Female federal prisoners were more likely to be employed and make more money than male federal prisoners.

The workshop had a general focus and did not seek to address challenges and strategies (such as gender-responsive programming) related to specific groups. Similarly, it is understood that successful employment outcomes are highly dependent on an individual's motivation and how well prepared they are to return to the community. Certain factors, such as mental health (Wallace and Wang, 2020), substance use (Link and Hamilton, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018), and housing (Jacobs and Gottlieb, 2020), are critically important and should be addressed during incarceration and throughout the reentry transition. These factors were not the primary focus of the workshop, but they are important to examine in future efforts.

How the Bureau of Prisons Is Unique

The BOP shares many similarities with state correctional systems. Correctional systems are complex organizations with an extremely challenging mission, and they operate within a political ecosystem and compete for funding with other agencies, which can lead to resource constraints. Despite these similarities, the BOP is unique in some important respects.

System Size and Scope

By several measures, the BOP operates the largest correctional system in the United States. Approximately 159,000 individuals are in BOP custody; the next largest system is that of Texas, which houses approximately 136,000 individuals (Carson et al., 2021). The BOP maintains a staff of approximately 35,000 and operates with an annual budget of almost $8 billion (Bublé, 2023). Unlike state correctional systems, the BOP operates nationally and is responsible for housing individuals sentenced by all of the 94 federal judicial district courts. As a result, these individuals may reside in any of the states or territories or the District of Columbia and can be designated to one of 122 federal correctional institutions of varying security levels. Although the BOP attempts to house individuals within 500 driving miles of their release residences, this is not always possible, because of security requirements, medical and mental health needs, programming needs, or other factors. Furthermore, some states (such as Texas and California) have multiple institutions, and 13 states (such as Iowa and Utah) do not have any. Ultimately, unlike state prisons, where the vast majority of incarcerated individuals are from the state in which they are incarcerated and will be released to that state, federal institutions often house individuals far from their homes, and the population will be released to different parts of the country. It can be challenging for institutional staff to develop relationships and connect with relevant resources (e.g., employers, reentry service providers, workforce development programs) in the communities that individuals are returning to.

Grant Funding

Over the past several years, the federal government has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in grant funding to support the successful reentry of adult and juvenile offenders into their communities.[7] Typically, eligibility to compete for these grants is limited to state, local, and tribal government agencies and nonprofit reentry service organizations. Workshop participants noted that, as a federal agency, the BOP generally cannot receive grant funds. This ineligibility to apply for grants can be a hindrance in terms of access to needed funds, and it may lead to fewer opportunities for institutional staff to connect with community-based reentry service organizations and build relationships to strengthen continuity of care for returning citizens as they transition from prison.

Oversight and Political Influence

Unlike state correctional systems, which are under the oversight of the governor and the state legislature, the BOP is overseen by a number of federal entities. The director of the BOP is appointed by the U.S. Attorney General. Certain entities, such as congressional oversight committees, GAO, and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, regularly investigate and evaluate aspects of the agency's operations and generate recommendations that must be responded to.

Bureaucratic Regulations

The BOP is subject to a different set of rules and regulations from those for state correctional systems. While the First Step Act promotes partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, these partnerships can be difficult to navigate because of Federal Acquisition Regulation and other guidelines on ethical practices, such as equitable treatment of similar organizations.

Participants noted that even accepting free services can be problematic from an ethical perspective.

Methods

RAND and the University of Denver, on behalf of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), hosted a virtual workshop to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with improving employment outcomes among BOP releasees and outline necessary steps to alter the current trajectory. RAND and the University of Denver convened a group of BOP administrators, community-based reentry service providers, researchers, national employers, and other experts, including with lived experience, to participate in the workshop.

Project staff, in consultation with NIJ, identified candidate participants via existing networks, searches for organizations and individuals with relevant experience, searches for participants who had studied relevant topics, and referrals. During the invitation process, substitutes were identified by initial invitees when they were unable to participate. Ultimately, a group of 17 experts was convened. The participants and their affiliations are shown in the "Participants" box.

The workshop was held during March and April 2022. Because of social distancing requirements associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop was held virtually, in two stages. During the initial stage, which took place from mid-March to mid-April, project staff conducted interviews ranging from 45 to 60 minutes with each participant via a web-conferencing application. The purpose of the interviews was to gather participant insights on key challenges and opportunities from their unique perspectives and experiences. Participant input was synthesized into the following key themes:

- **Internal BOP issues.** This theme consists of administrative, bureaucratic, structural, geographic, and resource constraints; organizational culture; technology infrastructure; and challenges with establishing partnerships with local community-based reentry organizations.
- **Preparation for success.** This theme consists of strength-based needs assessment; holistic programming models; educational and vocational programming that leads to marketable credentials; development of employability skills and digital literacy; and peer support and mentoring.
- **Connections to employers in the community.** This theme consists of leveraging technology for virtual job fairs; providing access to internet content for job searching;

PARTICIPANTS

Harley Blakeman
Honest Jobs

Richard Bronson
70 Million Jobs

John Buckley
Koch Industries

Patti Butterfield
Southern New Hampshire University

Nan Gibson
JPMorgan Chase

Bobby Jones-Hanley
Pure 1

Jennifer Lynch
Goodwill Industries

Genevieve Martin
Dave's Killer Bread Foundation

Jamie Rigling
Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts

Jesse Turner
The Kroger Co.

Chidi Umez-Rowley
Council of State Governments

Christopher Watler
Center for Employment Opportunities

Steve Woolworth
Evergreen Treatment Services

Cassi Zumbiel
The Manufacturing Institute

Anonymous
Federal Bureau of Prisons

Anonymous
Federal Bureau of Prisons

Anonymous
Federal Bureau of Prisons

and informing industry of the skills that returning citizens possess.

- **Supervision after institutional release.** This theme consists of policies and requirements that may be counterproductive to success; the need for ongoing support throughout the transition process; and synergy with local employers and community-based reentry service providers.
- **Employer perspectives.** This theme consists of identifying challenges and opportunities of hiring returning citizens; overcoming stigma and other barriers; celebrating successes; countering misconceptions (e.g., a need to modify hiring practices, potential liability); and creating synergy with community-based reentry service providers.
- **Reforms.** This theme consists of relaxation or elimination of regulatory employment restrictions and automatic expungement of criminal records.
- **Data and research needs.** This theme consists of internally tracking program participation while individuals are in prison; tracking postrelease employment outcomes; and linking employment outcomes to specific programs.

The themes were provided to participants to review in preparation for the second stage of the workshop. In this stage, project staff convened the participants in two three-hour virtual meetings over two days: April 19 and 26. The purpose of these sessions was to introduce the participants to one another, discuss the challenges faced in each theme, and provide recommendations to overcome these hurdles. Participants also had the opportunity to raise issues that did not come up during the individual interviews. The discussions and input provided by the participants form the basis of this report. Additionally, project staff leveraged available published data to provide context for the discussions. To a significant degree, facilitators allowed participants to direct the conversation and discuss themes the group considered important. As a result, some themes were discussed in more detail, and not every theme is presented at the same level of detail in this report. Focus was placed primarily on actionable solutions that the BOP could implement to improve employability among returning citizens.

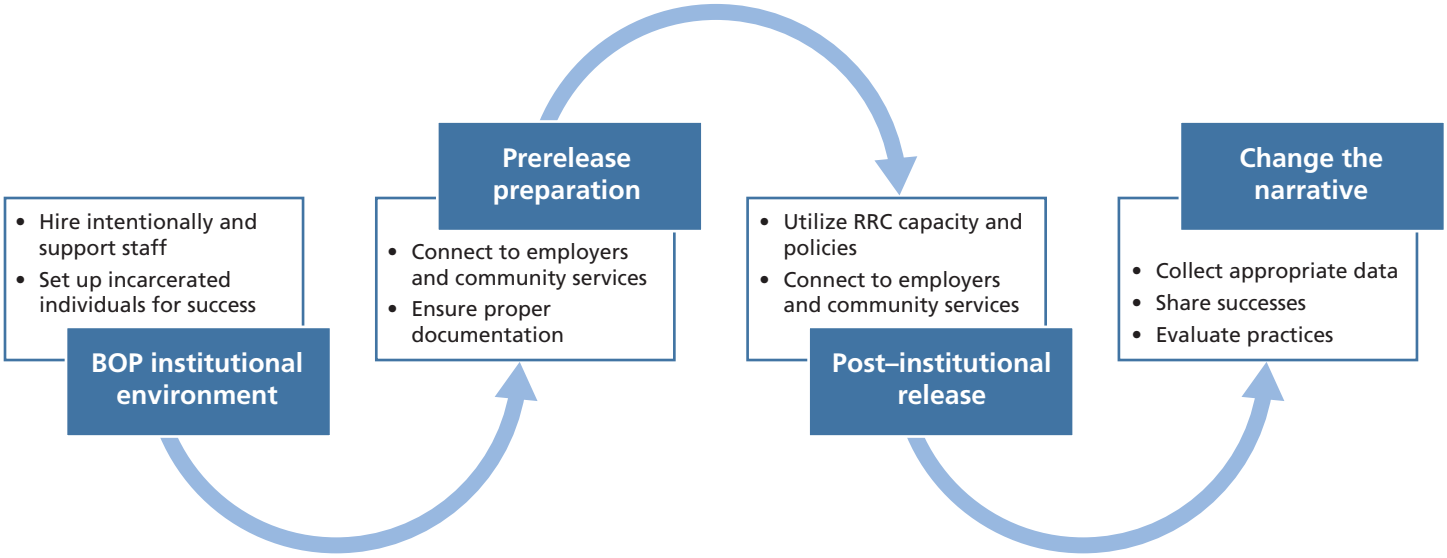
The small number of participants in the workshop introduces the potential for bias in our results. Specifically, a different group of participants might have identified other priorities. It should also be acknowledged that several participants (e.g., community-based reentry service providers, researchers, employers) were not affiliated with the BOP, so their input was largely based on their experiences with returning citizens and reentry programs in general and was not necessarily specific to BOP releasees. Nevertheless, much of their input was still applicable to BOP releasees and provided insights into other correctional systems and local organizations working in this space. Many of the generalizations are useful in framing the challenges and potential solutions.

Although efforts were made to obtain full participation in the group meetings, not everyone could attend each session. In addition, beyond looking for contextual information or other sources to expand on the discussion of points that seemed particularly salient, project staff did not fact-check or seek to verify the statements made by participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews and workshop discussions pointed to critical and interconnected factors that participants perceived as important to success or failure (see Figure 2). These factors follow the process from incarceration to release and suggest that successful employment and recidivism outcomes could be improved by making positive changes at each step, including improving the institutional environment of the BOP, accounting for structural features of the BOP (e.g., size and location of institutions), hiring and training staff to be aligned with values that support inmate success, changing the culture to support the success of incarcerated individuals, and developing or updating institutional programming to maximize opportunities for incarcerated individuals. Prerelease preparation directly connects to postrelease success and includes improving connections to employers and community-based organizations and ensuring that incarcerated persons have proper identification and other documentation, which helps set them up with other forms of support on release. The period following institutional release is when the BOP begins to lose sight of returning citizens, but this phase is critical for supporting both immediate and long-term success through RRC policies and capacity, connections to employers, and connections to community supports. The BOP's inability to maintain contact with or track individuals after release from BOP custody is a substantial challenge to measuring outcomes. Lastly, participants expressed the view that, to change the narrative about returning citizens and their employability, improved data collection is necessary for the BOP and employers. This would allow the BOP or interested employers to share successes and would provide an opportunity for the BOP and employers to evaluate their practices and make

Figure 2. Key Factors for Supporting Employment



data-informed improvements. Each of these issues is discussed in detail below.

Organizational Culture

A report from the National Institute of Corrections defines *culture* in corrections as "the values, assumptions, and beliefs people hold that drive the way the institution functions and the way people think and behave" (Byrne, Taxman, and Hummer, 2005). Although the BOP provides incarcerated individuals with opportunities to improve their employment outcomes, the workshop participants discussed issues with organizational culture that might hinder that goal.

Organizational culture can manifest in a variety of ways. For example, in many institutions, a negative culture may be reflected in an "us-versus-them" mentality exhibited by staff toward the incarcerated population. These staff may believe that their primary role is to protect society from these individuals or protect them from each other rather than helping them improve their prospects for successful reentry into society after release (Zweig and Blackmore, 2008).

> "You can see the difference when people work with staff who are good and care. . . . But I've also seen staff coming in the back door so [that] they didn't have to encounter incarcerated individuals."

> "We've really progressed over the last 20 years, but it's really important to understand that it's a prison first—with education and training programs within it."

Several participants noted that these attitudes exist within BOP institutions to varying degrees and can undermine efforts to improve reentry outcomes. Although a tension between security and treatment objectives is common in any correctional agency (Hepburn and Albonetti, 1980; Josi and Sechrest, 1996),[8] the BOP is unique in some respects. For example, unlike state and local correctional agencies, the BOP is designated as a *law enforcement* agency. All staff who work in an institution, including correctional officers, vocational trainers, teachers, and case managers, are considered law enforcement officers. Staff are also *correctional workers*; they must complete a three-week in-residence course called "Introduction to Correctional Techniques" and may perform correctional work (i.e., security functions) as needed regardless of their specific institu-

tional occupations. According to the participants, this structure inevitably emphasizes security concerns over other activities, such as vocational programming and education. Some participants noted that, although many staff are invested in the success of incarcerated individuals, there remains a pervasive punitive attitude that must be overcome. For example, some staff may look down on incarcerated individuals and treat them as "less than."

> "We have staff who model positive behaviors, but a lot don't."

Participants noted that correctional officers often come from military backgrounds and may be primarily attracted to the security aspects of the job. While security is critically important, the participants noted that officers spend considerable time with incarcerated individuals and, therefore, can play a key role in preparing them for successful reentry by emphasizing positive personal interactions and modeling prosocial behaviors to the extent possible. Shifting the interaction approach of correctional officers can be challenging, the participants noted, because staff are generally trained to be security-minded and are cautioned against getting overly familiar with individuals in custody (e.g., because of concerns about inappropriate relationships and staff vulnerability to compromise). With guidance and support, officers can be trained to be role models and change agents, not just performers of a security function.

Similar concerns were raised about staff responsible for rehabilitative programs and reentry services, although to a lesser extent. While most staff are enthusiastic and supportive of incarcerated individuals, some are not. This might not be surprising in an agency with approximately 35,000 employees, but it is still an issue that must be addressed. Challenges with negative or unhelpful staff will only compound the many barriers to successful reentry that incarcerated individuals already face.

Participants suggested that recruitment efforts designed to attract staff with a more "helping" mindset may be beneficial and that ongoing training for existing staff on the importance of employment and reentry programming and their role in support of this objective can also help. Furthermore, they noted that an overall emphasis on programming can itself help change the culture. When incarcerated individuals are motivated to actively engage in self-improvement and are supported by staff, the atmosphere in the institution is often more positive, which can lead to a better environment for all.[9]

> "I was up on my soapbox with my staff. Even within our division, even education, chaplaincy, halfway houses, we have people who don't like inmates and don't want to help inmates; they repeat awful stereotypes about inmates."

Other suggestions included aligning performance evaluation measures with desired behaviors to incentivize staff investment in the success of incarcerated individuals. Such behaviors might involve helping incarcerated individuals obtain identification; modeling prosocial behaviors, such as treating other staff and incarcerated individuals with respect and responding to incarcerated individuals' requests in a timely manner; and providing other positive support. Ultimately, changing the culture in a large organization is a complex task that can take years. While progress is slowly being made, participants noted that powerful labor unions and the civil service system can be barriers to some initiatives, such as policy changes, staffing reassignments to ensure that the right person is in the right role, and modification of performance evaluation and promotion processes. Finally, some participants identified leadership instability as a hindrance to achieving change in these areas. For example, as of 2021, there have been six different acting or permanent BOP directors in five years (Hurwitz, 2021), and a new director was appointed in July 2022 (Johnson, 2022).

Staffing Issues

Like its counterparts at the state level, the BOP has struggled with staffing shortages for several years (DeChalus, 2022). This

challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated national labor shortages. According to the agency, recent recruitment efforts have resulted in significant staffing gains, but levels are currently trending downward nationwide, prompting the provision of incentives for new hires (BOP, 2022).

> "Our staff do a good job with what they have, but the deck is stacked against us."

Inadequate staffing both directly and indirectly affects the agency's ability to prepare individuals for employment and successful reentry (GAO, 2021). For example, a shortage of correctional officers can undermine the security and safety of an institution. Security is paramount in the BOP, but when staff and incarcerated individuals are inordinately concerned with their personal safety, rehabilitative efforts become even less of a priority. More directly, institutional programming may rely on correctional officers to escort individuals to and from classes, work assignments, or other activities, and officers may be required to remain and supervise these activities. When officers are unavailable for this function because of shortages, activities may be canceled. A byproduct of correctional officer shortages is a BOP process known as *augmentation* (Sisak and Balsamo, 2021). When a security post is not covered by a correctional officer, the institution may be forced to leverage other staff, such as teachers or case managers, to fill in. The frequency of the use of augmentation and its impact are significant. For example, the use of the practice across all BOP institutions increased 47 percent from fiscal year (FY) 2015 through FY 2019, and two of the six regions had increases of more than 100 percent (Trautman, 2022). In FY 2019, 325,000 hours of augmentation were reported, which is the equivalent of 156 full-time employees. The increasing reliance on augmentation is clearly a hindrance to the delivery of vocational and educational training programs and reentry services. In some cases, all programming can be canceled on any given day (GAO, 2021).

> "Staff shortages mean that computer labs sometimes sit empty."

> "We need staff to deliver programs, which we hardly ever get."

Shortages in other key positions (such as teachers, case managers, and vocational instructors) have more directly affected rehabilitative programming and reentry services in some institutions (Pavlo, 2022). Moreover, the BOP has struggled to fill dedicated positions to expand First Step Act programs to support reentry. For example, as of January 2022, 22 of the 51 positions in the area of education, which includes vocational programming, were vacant (Office of the Attorney General, 2022).

Participants reported that these positions are controlled at the local-institution level, and, when staff leave the agency, they might not be replaced. Similar issues were identified in an independent assessment of the BOP's education program:

> [P]reliminary findings indicate that education positions and personnel are regularly reallocated at will to other functions or tasks by local prison administrations. In the competition for local institution priorities and resources, and without clear incentives otherwise, education and training programs always lose. (Bronner Group, LLC, 2016, p. v)

Several other factors may hinder the BOP's ability to recruit and retain programming and reentry service staff. For example, participants noted that important positions, such as reentry affairs coordinators, lack a career path with opportunities to advance. As a result, as experienced staff move on, continuity of service provision can suffer while a new person learns the role. In some cases, the federal government's pay scale is not competitive. For example, one participant noted that candidates for positions as vocational instructors can earn more money in the private sector. Compensation aside, geography can also present challenges; participants reported that it can be difficult to recruit qualified staff to fill positions in some

> "We need qualified vocational training instructors; they can make a lot of money as journeymen, and we're going to give them GS11 pay—not going to cut it."

institutions, particularly those located in remote areas or areas with high costs of living.

Ultimately, these recruitment and retention challenges must be addressed, as they directly hinder agency efforts to prepare individuals for employment and successful reentry to the community.

> "We have a place . . . in the middle of nowhere, and we cannot hire anyone there, so we really can't put any programs there."

General Programming

Participants noted the mantra that "reentry starts on day one," but this is often more of an aspiration than a reality. The BOP's website acknowledges that "focus on release preparation intensifies at least 18 months prior to release" (BOP, undated-b), and participants from the BOP reported that they try their best to focus on those individuals who are closest to release first, particularly those without job skills or credentials. Several participants discussed the tension between the need to engage incarcerated individuals in meaningful vocational and educational programming as quickly as possible and practical constraints.

Many of the constraints are resource related. As participants noted, although the BOP offers a variety of quality programs, it is limited in scale and simply cannot accommodate the demand. For example, such constraints as staff shortages

> "We say, 'reentry starts on the first day,' but I don't think there's anyone who believes that."

and lack of physical space can limit the number of individuals that can be enrolled in a program, resulting in long waitlists in some areas, such as GED and literacy programs. Furthermore, not all programs are offered in every institution, which can somewhat limit the opportunities available to an incarcerated individual. For example, FPI operates in only about half of all institutions. Currently, approximately 16,000 individuals (roughly 8 percent of the incarcerated population) participate in FPI, and another 25,000 individuals are waiting to participate in the program (BOP, undated-d). Finally, because resources are limited, legally mandated programming (e.g., GED and literacy programs) takes priority over other programming (e.g., soft skills, postsecondary education, vocational training).

Other challenges pertain to timing, logistics, and the length of an individual's sentence. For example, certain vocational certifications may have a shelf life (e.g., they expire after five years). Therefore, program completion should be aligned with release date. On the other hand, some individuals may be unable to participate in and complete some programs because their sentences are too short or they have applied to participate too close to release.

Participants expressed concern that if incarcerated individuals are not engaged in meaningful vocational and educational programming and reentry planning up front, they could be more likely to develop bad habits or succumb to antisocial influences in the institution. Participants called for providing earlier interventions and spreading dosages throughout the incarceration period. They recognized that some forms of programming or support can more realistically be accomplished early in the incarceration period than others. For example,

> "I don't think there is enough dosage all the way through [incarceration]."

there may be no need to delay the process of obtaining identification. Developing résumé-writing and interviewing skills should not have to wait until the tail end of incarceration; these skills can be developed and practiced throughout the incarceration period. Other alternatives (such as increased access to postsecondary education, increased access to programming, and expanded eligibility for FPI participation) may be more challenging, but they are achievable given adequate resources. Ultimately, participants argued that individuals should not be left to languish in the early stages of their incarceration.

Career Planning

Incarcerated individuals, particularly those with little or no work history, may struggle to identify what type of employment to seek after release. Workshop participants argued that efforts to provide career guidance could be improved in several ways. For example, greater emphasis should be placed on working with individuals early in the process to determine their interests, passions, and career goals. Participants encouraged greater use of strength-based assessments to support career planning, noting that typical risk and needs assessments focus primarily on the past and negative, often traumatic, situations (e.g., criminal history, substance use). An emphasis on future possibilities, protective factors, and the positives in an individual's life can be critical to nurturing a sense of hopefulness.

From there, staff should work with individuals to identify the appropriate paths that allow them to leverage their strengths to obtain the skills and/or recognized credentials necessary for future employment opportunities. Participants discussed the importance of establishing short- and long-term goals with individuals so that they are always working toward something. This can help keep individuals on track throughout incarceration and beyond, and staff should periodically check in to reassess and readjust the plan as needed.

As part of career planning, there is a need for better alignment between the credential an individual wants to earn and any employment restrictions that may exist in the state they are returning to. For example, one workshop participant recalled a situation in which an individual earned a certificate in cosmetology only to later learn that they were restricted from getting a license in their state of residence. To avoid wasted effort and frustration, staff should be better equipped to provide this guidance (e.g., create a state policy database). Incarcerated individuals should also have access to this information in some form (e.g., via applications on a tablet or permitted sites accessible in a computer lab) so that they are empowered to make better decisions for themselves.[10]

Provision of Services to Those Most in Need

According to participants, individuals with the highest risks and needs do not always receive the programming they need to succeed on return to the community. While some of these individuals may not wish to participate in programming, participants identified other factors. For example, staff might be disinclined to enroll individuals (or might discourage the enrollment of individuals) whom they perceive as "difficult," out of concern that activities might be disruptive for the entire group. Furthermore, internal policies (such as excluding individuals from certain programs because of a poor conduct record) may be an inhibitor. As a result, classes may be composed of mostly lower-risk individuals who receive a relatively lower benefit from programming. Not only is this an inefficient use of resources, but also it skews data regarding correlations between program participation and outcomes, such as recidivism. Most importantly, the individuals who most need the programming are not getting it (Chamberlain, 2012).[11]

> "We're not going to move the needle if we're only helping the people that are easiest to help in terms of programs, connections, and educational opportunities."

Data on program participation by risk or security level during incarceration are not readily available. However, data on RRC participation may be revealing. According to a report from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General, between October 2013 and April 2016, 90 percent of minimum-security and 75 percent of low-security individuals were placed in RRCs, home confinement, or both (Office of the Inspector General, 2016). Only 58 percent of high-security individuals were placed into RRCs. The remaining 42 percent were released directly into the community without the benefit of transitional reentry services. The report acknowledges that many high-security individuals may have been ineligible for

RRC placement because of public safety risk. Workshop participants recommended that the BOP review internal policies and processes and modify them as needed to ensure that resources are dedicated to those individuals who are most in need in a manner that does not compromise public safety.

Reentry Peer Navigators

According to participants, *peer navigators*, or mentors with lived experience, can play an important role in preparing incarcerated individuals for employment and successful reentry.[12] The BOP should consider ways to better leverage peer navigators, beginning in the incarceration period and continuing throughout the reentry process (i.e., in the RRC).

Peer navigators have been used successfully in reentry programs across the country (Matthews, 2021). Properly vetted, trained, and supervised navigators can offer several benefits. For example, these individuals often have immediate credibility with incarcerated individuals, as they may come from similar backgrounds and share common life experiences. Because peer navigators have successfully navigated the reentry process themselves, they can provide emotional support, guidance, encouragement, and hope to incarcerated individuals. As needed or allowed, they may also serve as advocates to help ensure that needs (such as obtaining identification) are being addressed. They may influence change in correctional organizations and their connections with the community (Portillo, Goldberg, and Taxman, 2017). Peer navigators can provide guidance on planning careers, setting reasonable expectations, interviewing effectively, explaining gaps in employment, and dealing with difficult bosses and coworkers. Furthermore, they can help individuals better prepare for life in the community in general, such as by helping them navigate access to social services, deal with family issues, or simply prepare for the multitude of decisions they will have to make on their own once they are released into the community.

Volunteers as Peer Navigators

Workshop participants discussed the possibility of using volunteers as an additional source of support, but several challenges were raised. Although the BOP leverages thousands of volunteers to support reentry efforts, the process to gain clearance to enter an institution can be rigorous, and the agency tends to take a conservative approach to these decisions. Participants noted that, in most cases, formerly incarcerated individuals would have difficulty gaining approval to volunteer. Approvals are made on a case-by-case basis at the local level, and some institutions can be more restrictive than others. Another obstacle to the use of volunteers is that some institutions, particularly those with high security classifications, are in remote areas that are difficult to access or in small communities with fewer resources. Furthermore, the pool of potential volunteers in these areas is likely limited.

> "It's a very rare exception for a prior inmate to be able to come in."

Challenges aside, participants said that policies should be reexamined to better leverage volunteers. For example, to the extent possible, institutions should consider relaxing restrictions, as the benefits can outweigh the risks. The BOP should consider relaxing restrictions agencywide. Furthermore, if investments are made in telepresence infrastructure, vetted volunteer peer navigators could interact with incarcerated individuals remotely (e.g., via tablet, kiosk, or computer). This approach could provide the benefit of pairing incarcerated individuals with navigators who live in the communities that these individuals will be released to and who are, therefore, knowledgeable about the location, job market, housing, and available reentry resources. Ideally, with coordination, the peer navigators could remain attached to the reentering individuals throughout release to RRCs, community supervision, or both, providing continuity of care. To address security concerns, telepresence interactions could be monitored or recorded as needed.

Hiring of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Taking it a step further, some participants argued that it would be powerful if the BOP could *hire* peer navigators with lived experience. At least 30 states have policies that allow such

> "When you talk to returning citizens, [they say that] their success was attributed to a person, not a program."

hiring. Like volunteers, these staff could work with incarcerated individuals at the institution or, ideally, remotely, from the community. Several state and local correctional systems have successfully hired formerly incarcerated persons to work in their prisons (Chammah and Neff, 2018). Typically, policies prohibit these individuals from working as correctional officers or in positions that allow access to sensitive information; however, jobs in rehabilitative services are usually permitted. For example, the South Dakota Department of Corrections hired a formerly incarcerated individual to work as a mentor to individuals held in restrictive housing (Hult, 2016). The New York City Department of Correction recently hired a formerly incarcerated individual to serve in a senior leadership position (Miller, 2021).

As discussed, the BOP operates in a different environment from that of state and local correctional agencies. As a law enforcement agency, the BOP lacks flexibility with respect to hiring individuals with criminal records, since it is bound by policies imposed at a higher level (i.e., the U.S. Department of Justice). Participants noted the irony that the BOP is encouraging employers to hire returning citizens when it itself cannot do so. However, policy change could provide an opportunity to lead by example. Clearly, the BOP should not ignore a candidate's criminal past, but case-by-case hiring decisions would be more useful than blanket restrictions and would demonstrate a meaningful commitment to helping returning citizens succeed.

> "[Hiring individuals convicted of felonies is] a challenging thing to do, but we are asking corporations to do it."

A somewhat easier lift would be expansion of the use of peer navigators in the RRCs. Participants noted that, on some occasions, BOP officials authorize RRC operators to hire formerly incarcerated individuals, but this is not general practice. The participants expressed the view that, regardless of the setting or structure, greater use of properly vetted and supervised peer navigators could better prepare returning citizens for employment opportunities.

Skill Development

Alignment with the Needs of Industry

According to participants, employment outcomes could significantly improve through stronger working relationships between the BOP and key players (such as community-based reentry service organizations, workforce development entities, employers, labor unions, workforce boards, chambers of commerce, and business roundtables) in the communities that most incarcerated individuals will be returning to. Better coordination and collaboration with these entities directly or through intermediary organizations can yield several benefits. For example, the BOP aims to provide incarcerated individuals with access to vocational programming that is aligned with the current and future needs of industry. These entities, which have "boots on the ground," can provide important insights that could be used to help guide decisions about future programming and resource investment. These relationships could also yield timely insights on local job markets that could help inform career planning for incarcerated individuals and fill specific gaps in the workforce. If individuals are made aware that there is (or will be) a shortage of welders in their community, they may be motivated to pursue training and certification in this field.

Aspects of the BOP structure can make it challenging to establish partnerships with these entities. The vast majority of BOP staff are based in one of the 122 correctional institutions across the country, which are often located in remote areas. Typically, there is one reentry affairs coordinator (RAC) per institution. RACs work with key entities in the communities surrounding the institutions. However, in most cases, these are not the same communities that most individuals will be releasing to. Reentry staff at an institution work with individuals returning to any number of communities across the country, which can make it challenging to understand each ecosystem and coordinate resources. RRCs are better positioned to make these connections, at least geographically, but they are operated by a multitude of contractors, and service levels can be uneven. Participants argued that partnerships between reentry staff and key entities in the community should be leveraged while individuals are still in the institution; therefore, the BOP might develop a strategy to better connect institutional staff with community ecosystems and dedicate resources toward this effort. For example, expanded use of telepresence technology could be leveraged.

Beyond geography, some participants noted structural barriers. Although the First Step Act calls for increased public-sector and private-sector partnerships, some participants men-

tioned that it can be challenging for the BOP to develop these relationships because of the Federal Acquisition Regulation and other guidelines and internal processes that are designed to ensure equitable treatment of similar organizations. Even access to free services can present challenges, according to some participants. Clarity and direction are needed so that the agency can take full advantage of these partnerships and potential opportunities.

Skills in Demand

With respect to vocational programming that is currently offered, participants asserted that skilled trades (e.g., welders, mechanics, electricians, HVAC technicians) are in high demand, pay very well, and have a relatively low point of entry. Greater investment in developing these skills may be fruitful, particularly if connections can be made between the BOP and these industries. That said, in many cases, skilled trades are becoming increasingly digitized. For example, HVAC systems are now controlled by home automation devices via Wi-Fi or Bluetooth. Today's automobiles can have as many as 100 electronic control units, each dedicated to a specific function (Muller, 2019). Therefore, the participants argued that vocational training programs should incorporate modern technology as needed so that individuals will be fully prepared to work in the "real world." For example, FPI has invested in state-of-the-art technology and equipment in some portfolio areas. Other vocational programs should keep pace to remain relevant. In some cases, access to technology may introduce security risks that must be managed.

While the BOP offers some training to prepare incarcerated individuals for careers in information technology, and such programs as The Last Mile have gained traction in state correctional agencies,[13] some participants expressed the view that this field may be saturated. Furthermore, careers in coding or software development may be of interest to only a small segment of the incarcerated population, and those individuals would be competing with non-justice-involved college graduates for the same jobs.

> "Skilled trades are awesome. We can place mechanics and folks with a [commercial driver's license] in high-paying jobs all day long."

> "Every millennial is getting into tech now. The sweet spot is skilled trades."

Employability Skills

Participants said that returning citizens often lack employability skills—i.e., soft skills. Lack of these skills can render returning citizens unprepared to enter the workforce on release. Among individuals released from BOP custody in 2010, only one-third were employed at any point in the three years prior to incarceration (Carson et al., 2021). Participants argued that greater emphasis should be placed on teaching the basic life skills that affect employability, such as proper hygiene and dress, being on time, social cues, interpersonal skills, and verbal and nonverbal communication.

Development of job interview skills should also be prioritized. According to a U.S. Department of Justice report, courses in interview skills were offered in only 47 percent of BOP institutions, and 55 percent of institutions offered mock job fairs (Office of the Inspector General, 2016). Participants stressed that returning citizens need to be able to confidently present themselves to prospective employers in a manner that highlights their positive attributes and the self-improvement initiatives they undertook during incarceration; that is, they need to be able to sell themselves. These individuals should be prepared with techniques and strategies to explain their time out of the workforce and navigate such issues as appropriately following up after an interview, dealing with rejection, negotiating a fair wage, requesting time off, resolving conflict, coping, and handling critical feedback from a supervisor. Although several of these skills are included in available programming, increased availability would be beneficial. Some participants argued that, whenever possible, this type of training should be provided by peer navigators or other qualified individuals with lived experience.

Beyond traditional programming, participants identified two somewhat novel approaches to improving soft skills. The first approach involves modifying institutional operational

> "A lot of the incarcerated individuals I've dealt with don't have the background to navigate bus systems to get to work; if you're going to be late, what do you do? We try our best to teach these skills, but I think we honestly fail at it; a lot of it comes down to the commitment of the person overseeing those programs at the institution."

practices. Most institutional jobs (such as food service, janitorial, and laundry jobs) are simply assigned to individuals. Instead, the BOP could consider a formal interview process for all work assignments and promotions. Individuals could be managed and evaluated on work performance in a way that mirrors what they might experience in the community. They could benefit from the opportunity to practice their interviewing skills, become more accustomed to employer expectations, and learn to accept critical feedback, all of which are highly relevant in the job market. Participants acknowledged that these practices would require a change in organizational culture, and any work perceived as an additional demand on staff might require buy-in from staff and the union.

The second approach leverages technology to help individuals practice their interviewing skills. For example, in its Vocational Villages program, the Michigan Department of Corrections is exploring a virtual reality (VR)–supported job interview training tool (Smith et al., 2020). Using the tool, an incarcerated individual may select one of eight positions at a fictional company and complete a job application similar to those found online from national retailers. They can then "interview" with a virtual hiring manager that interacts with the individual's responses to open-ended questions. An on-screen, nonverbal job coach feature provides real-time feedback on performance. After each interview, the individual is scored on their performance and receives summary feedback. Repetitive practice

> "[More formal opportunities to interview] could give [incarcerated individuals] feedback on their soft skills and where they need to grow; [they] could help identify issues [e.g., problem with authority or need to improve communication skills], then get people into support groups."

allows the individual to improve skills and get more comfortable in an interview setting, including by answering difficult questions about a prior conviction. Results of a feasibility study indicate that users found the tool to be user friendly and helpful in preparing for interviews (Smith et al., 2023). Furthermore, use of the tool appears to improve job interview skills, reduce anxiety associated with interviews, and improve employment outcomes (Smith et al., 2023). Variations of this technology are being used in the community. For example, Goodwill Industries, in partnership with Accenture, has made VR-based interview training available in ten community-based organizations across the country (Brown, 2021). The BOP should evaluate the feasibility of leveraging VR-based training tools or other technology-based training tools to build interview skills.

> "The more we can incorporate real-life situations using technology, the better prepared individuals will be for reentry."

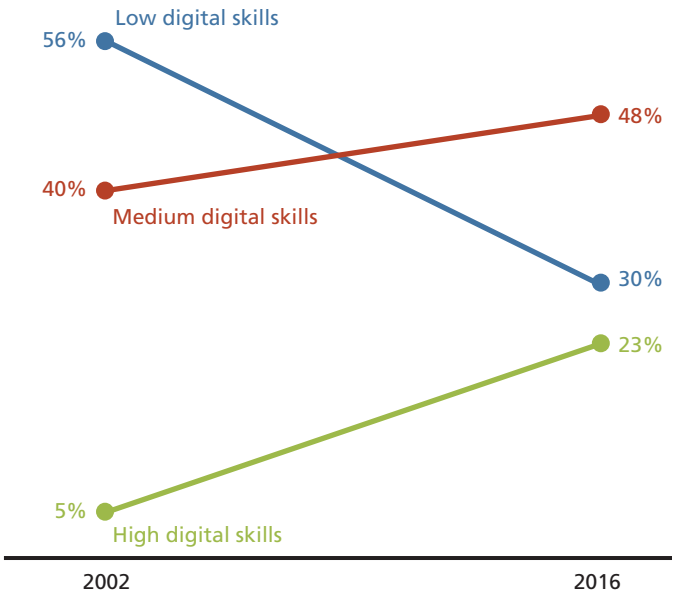
Basic Digital Literacy

There is a growing recognition that a foundational level of digital literacy (e.g., turning on a computer, using a smartphone, conducting an internet search, writing an email, submitting an online application) is necessary to even function, much less thrive, in today's society (Hecker and Loprest, 2019); see Figure 3, which illustrates the share of jobs in low–, medium–, and high–digital skill occupations in 2002 and 2016. According to workshop participants, many returning citizens lack these skills, and this lack can be a major barrier to gainful employment. For example, it is impossible to access information about job openings, apply for positions, or navigate the selection process without access to technology and the requisite skills to use it. Even most low-skilled workers in today's job market need a degree of digital literacy. For example, commercial truck drivers need to be able to use GPS navigation.

Furthermore, as digitalization has rapidly changed the world of work, it has inevitably affected the skills needed for economic opportunity and advancement (Muro et al., 2017). That is, digital skills are not only increasingly required for entry-level jobs but also critical for progressing from a job to an eventual career. For a variety of reasons, individuals may never have had the opportunity to develop these skills prior to incarceration. In some cases, even individuals who possessed these skills prior to incarceration or may be considered digital natives will be poorly positioned on release because of the rapid advancement of technology. For example, more than 50 percent of those in BOP custody have sentences of over ten years (BOP, 2023). Therefore, the technology that individuals may have used in the community before incarceration will likely be obsolete by the time of their release. Ultimately, returning citizens too often come out of prison on the wrong side of the digital divide and, thus, are disadvantaged. To help bridge this gap, participants recommended that the BOP consider bolstering existing programs (or creating new ones) to teach basic digital skills to incarcerated individuals prior to their release. Furthermore, as technology advances rapidly, refresher courses or updates may be required at various intervals. One participant said that these skills are so important that they should be prioritized to be on par with current mandates regarding GED and literacy program participation or should be otherwise incentivized in some way.

Access to technology can present security risks. According to participants, the BOP needs to manage these risks and work to find a balance between legitimate security concerns and the importance of digital literacy to employment and successful reentry. Furthermore, the agency should explore ways to incentivize appropriate use of technology to mitigate risk.

Figure 3. Share of Jobs in Low–, Medium–, and High–Digital-Skill Occupations, 2002 and 2016



SOURCE: Adapted from Muro et al., 2017.

Preparation of Résumés and Supporting Documents

According to participants, every returning citizen should leave prison with a résumé, regardless of length of incarceration. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this does not always occur. Participants identified opportunities for improvement. For example, access to résumé-writing courses, which were offered in only 58 percent of institutions, could be expanded

> "The BOP can be so risk averse that we take ourselves out of the game. We know the risks; we just have to manage them. We can't allow all individuals to fall behind because 10 percent will find a way to cheat the system."

(Office of the Inspector General, 2016). Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on helping individuals prepare functional résumés (versus traditional or chronological résumés) that highlight their skills, education, and self-improvement efforts without focusing on their time in prison.

> "Make sure [that returning citizens] come home with a résumé—even if it is 15 years of prison work."

Many incarcerated individuals may have no previous work experience to document, and, for some, a prison job may be the only position they have ever held. The lack of a verifiable work history can be a significant impediment to securing employment, according to participants. To help address this issue, participants suggested that the BOP consider encouraging staff to provide personalized recommendations for individuals who have demonstrated *outstanding* performance, work ethic, or both in their institutional jobs. This kind of personalized, exceptional recommendation would be beneficial to incarcerated individuals, but the benefit would be lost if such recommendations became routine, perfunctory, or insincere. Although it was noted that FPI is exploring this approach, the practice could be expanded and supported by policy and guidance for staff. This is another area that would require cultural change and potential policy change for the agency, since some staff might be reluctant to be perceived as vouching for incarcerated individuals or might feel peer pressure to not go out of their way to help these individuals.

Relatedly, participants noted that incarcerated individuals might not have easy access to their résumés, recommendation letters, certifications, and other important documents, or these documents might be only in paper form. As individuals move from their institutions to RRCs or directly to their communities, hard copies can get lost or damaged. Furthermore, without access to a scanner, individuals cannot attach their résumés to online applications. Participants identified the need for electronic storage of critical documents (e.g., via a cloud service) so that they can be retrieved later from any device as needed. Such a solution not only would help individuals maintain their records but also would help downstream actors (e.g., RRCs, probation officers, community-based reentry organizations), since they often lack access to or even awareness of these documents and credentials. An investment in the BOP's information technology infrastructure may be required to actualize this recommendation.

Preparation for Release

Connections to Employers

Participants noted that although many individuals may attain marketable skills that prepare them to work, there is often a disconnect in securing jobs. As discussed, better relationships with community-based reentry organizations, employers, and other relevant entities can help bridge the gap. For example, participants asserted that employers, including those in large industries (such as manufacturing), are generally unaware of the types of skills that returning citizens may possess. As a result, they might not readily think of returning citizens as a source of talent. Participants recommended that the BOP develop strategies to effectively and proactively communicate this information to targeted segments of industry. For example, short videos highlighting FPI's manufacturing program could be produced and disseminated directly to relevant audiences to begin engagement with national and local employers. The key message is that returning citizens have relevant vocational skills and can fill vacancies on release. At a more tactical level, the BOP could proactively utilize data about individuals' skills, certifications, release dates, and release locations. For example, if the BOP knows that a cohort of individuals with commercial driver's licenses (from any institution) will be released to Colorado in the next 90 days, it could begin to work with employers and workforce development intermediaries in that state to let them know about this pool of talent and make connections.

> "I don't think Caterpillar or John Deere know[s] that we have guys who will be well prepared to enter that workforce."

Better Access to Job Information

Participants suggested that incarcerated individuals would benefit from greater access to information about employment opportunities on an ongoing basis. As discussed, most individuals are housed hundreds of miles from their residences, which makes it difficult for them to get information about the job market. Technology can help bridge this gap. For example, many community-based reentry organizations maintain online lists of resources—including lists of employers known to hire individuals with criminal records—for formerly incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, some entities (e.g., Honest Jobs, 70 Million Jobs) have online platforms that are specifically designed to connect incarcerated individuals with employment opportunities. These platforms often partner with verified second-chance employers to post positions online.[14] Some platforms allow applicants to register, enter their conviction data, search for jobs in their desired location, and/or use algorithms to generate a suitability score based on such factors as the match between the criminal record and the position. For example, a conviction of driving while intoxicated could lower the match score for a delivery driver position. In this way, individuals can identify the types of jobs that are available and the pay, which can help them determine the types of training they may wish to pursue while incarcerated. For individuals who are closer to release, this information could provide insights into the employers and positions that are most likely to lead to success, saving time and frustration. Of course, there are challenges associated with allowing incarcerated individuals to access the internet so that they can access these platforms and resources. That said, there are well-established methods to manage associated security risks, such as permitting access to approved links, supervising or monitoring access, and making content accessible without an internet connection.

> "We do a great job of education, but we do a poor job of giving [incarcerated individuals] the skills they need to go find the job; if they have a welding [certification], they don't know where to go get the job when they get out."

Virtual Job Fairs

Participants stressed that incarcerated individuals, particularly those with marketable skills and those who are work-ready, should be able to begin the process of seeking employment prior to release from the institution. Although the BOP has organized in-person job fairs at institutions, the effectiveness of this approach can be somewhat limited, according to participants. In large part, these events are typically attended by employers in the immediate area of the institution, and, as discussed, many individuals will be released to other locations. Therefore, these events might not be relevant to a large segment of the population or employers. There is a need to connect incarcerated individuals with potential employers in the cities that they will be returning to, and participants argued that telepresence technologies (such as videoconferencing) could be leveraged to address this challenge. There is precedent for this at the state level. For example, the Indiana Department of Correction has partnered with the Indiana Department of Workforce Development's Hoosier Initiative for Re-Entry to conduct

> "It would be great if, 60 days before release, [incarcerated individuals] have access to employers they fit with; start sending out résumés, maybe have [a] Zoom interview with the employer—so [that], at release, they may already have a job—instead of going to a halfway house and then start looking. At the halfway house, it's a matter of 'just find a job'; it's not about finding meaningful employment."

virtual job fairs (Barack, 2019). One series of events connected six employers with individuals incarcerated at five different prisons. Individuals were able to make connections with employers, learn about available jobs, and ask questions about the application process. In the BOP context, a series of virtual job fairs could be scheduled according to the metropolitan areas that incarcerated individuals will be returning to (e.g., Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles). Employers and other relevant organizations could be recruited and invited to present opportunities, and incarcerated individuals slated to return to the area could participate from any institution in the country. Some virtual job fairs could be specific to trades (such as manufacturing, diesel mechanics, or welding) based on common certifications earned by incarcerated individuals and could target relevant employers and labor unions in an area. The virtual job fair could lead to virtual interviews and tentative offers on release. While this approach is feasible, the BOP would likely require an investment in technology infrastructure to accomplish it in a secure manner. Furthermore, significant coordination would be required to organize the events.

Need for Identification

After incarceration, many individuals no longer have state-issued identification documents, such as birth certificates and drivers' licenses (Wise, 2020). In some cases, institutions may lose these documents (Deloitte Development, 2016). The lack of identification is a significant hindrance to obtaining employment, since this documentation is required to obtain employment, but it is also essential to accessing other services that are critical to successful reentry, such as government benefits, health care, and housing.

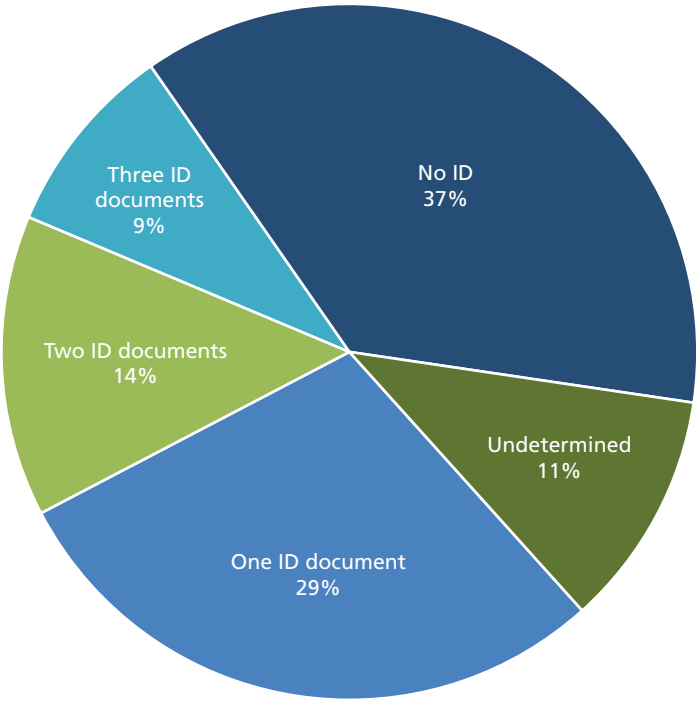
According to participants, many individuals are released from BOP institutions each year without adequate identification. According to a recent GAO report, of inmates released from a BOP facility from 2018 to 2021, just over 40 percent had a Social Security card, under 20 percent had a birth certificate, about 25 percent had a photo ID, 37 percent were released without any form of identification, and 11 percent were undetermined, as shown in Figure 4 (GAO, 2022).

> "It can take a lot of effort and time to obtain an ID. The bureaucratic maze is daunting, even for people who are well educated and well resourced."

Individuals released without identification documents must try to obtain replacement identification, which can be challenging because of related costs; transportation issues; difficulty obtaining other supporting documentation, which can take several weeks; or some combination of these factors. Furthermore, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many state departments of motor vehicles and Social Security Administration offices were closed to in-person transactions, creating additional delays and frustration for returning citizens (Wise, 2020). Ultimately, the lack of identification prevents individuals from hitting the ground running and can set them up for failure at the very time when they need the most support.

Recognizing the importance of this issue, 17 states have enacted laws aimed at helping incarcerated individuals get permanent or temporary identification cards on or immediately following release (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). Other states tackle this problem through agreements between administrative agencies, such as departments of motor vehicles and departments of corrections (DOCs). For example, a returning citizen can either exchange their DOC identifica-

Figure 4. Percentage of Individuals Released from the Federal Bureau of Prisons Who Have Identification



SOURCE: Features information from GAO, 2022.

tion directly for state-issued identification or allow the DOC ID to serve as the document to establish identification.

> "Depending on the institution, [returning citizens] may only release with the Social Security card."

According to participants, the BOP has lagged behind the states, even though the First Step Act requires the agency to assist individuals in obtaining identification. Although the BOP has a memorandum of understanding with the Social Security Administration in place that allows eligible individuals to apply for a replacement Social Security card, participants acknowledged that not everyone leaves an institution with this document in hand. It is significantly more challenging to secure state-issued identification from the BOP than it is to secure state-issued identification from a state DOC. Whereas a state can establish partnerships among relevant agencies and enact legislation as needed, the BOP, as a federal agency, does not have this authority. Efforts by a previous U.S. attorney general to encourage states to accept a returning citizen's BOP identification in exchange for state identification have not gained traction (Lantigua-Williams, 2016). However, in a few states, BOP identification is now accepted as a secondary form of identification (Georgia Justice Project, 2017). In these states, an individual with a birth certificate and a BOP ID can apply for state identification.

Participants encouraged the BOP to invest more resources and focus into obtaining Social Security cards and birth certificates for all individuals prior to their release from the institution. In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice (or other parts of federal government) should continue to work with states

> "It's very difficult to get a birth certificate, and people can start working on that while they're still in prison."

to incentivize the acceptance of a BOP ID as a recognized government-issued document.[15] Ultimately, formerly incarcerated individuals are returning to their states of residence. Easy access to identification allows these individuals to reintegrate more quickly, which can lower their chances of recidivism, providing a clear benefit to the local community and the state. Therefore, it would be in the state's best interest to remove the barrier of obtaining identification.

Driving Privileges

Although state-issued identification is not necessarily related to driving privileges, participants expressed the view that facilitating access to a driver's license is important for a variety of reasons. Some jobs may require the ability to drive. In addition, in some parts of the country, public transportation is not a viable option, so individuals need to be able to drive to get to and from work. Again, the BOP has no control over the issuance of a drivers' license. However, participants suggested that, at a minimum, an incarcerated individual's driving status should be examined as part of reentry planning so that issues, such as suspended, revoked, or expired licenses, can be identified well before release and a resolution plan put in place.

> "In my district, 40 to 50 percent of federal probationers can't get a driver's license."

Better Access to Community-Based Reentry Organizations

Participants discussed the need for stronger relationships between the BOP and key community-based reentry organizations in the cities that most incarcerated individuals will be returning to. For example, such entities as the Center for Employment Opportunities and Goodwill work in many communities across the country to connect returning citizens with transitional, subsidized employment, but these organizations also provide key supportive services, such as soft skills training, coaching, and career support. Providing incarcerated individuals with information about these entities, their available resources, and how to access them should lead to smoother transitions to the community, particularly if the individuals are

not placed in RRCs and/or have greater needs. Ideally, BOP staff could facilitate personal connections between individuals and appropriate organizations so that "warm handoffs" can occur prior to release from the institution.[16] Participants noted that these connections can provide comfort to returning citizens who might not have other support systems. These handoffs could occur in person, depending on the location of the institution; however, telepresence solutions would likely be more practical given the geographic challenges.

Post–Institutional Release Process

In most cases, an individual is transferred from a federal institution to BOP community custody in an RRC, which is followed by a period of supervised release—that is, probation. Overall, approximately 75 percent of incarcerated individuals are placed in RRCs for a period of up to one year (GAO, 2016), and approximately 80 percent must serve a period of probation (Schmitt and Jeralds, 2022). RRC residents are still technically in the custody of the BOP. When the custody portion of the sentence is complete, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts assumes responsibility of the case, if ordered to do so by the court, and the returning citizen is assigned to a U.S. probation officer in the district to which the returning citizen is releasing. Workshop participants discussed key challenges of the RRC and community supervision periods.

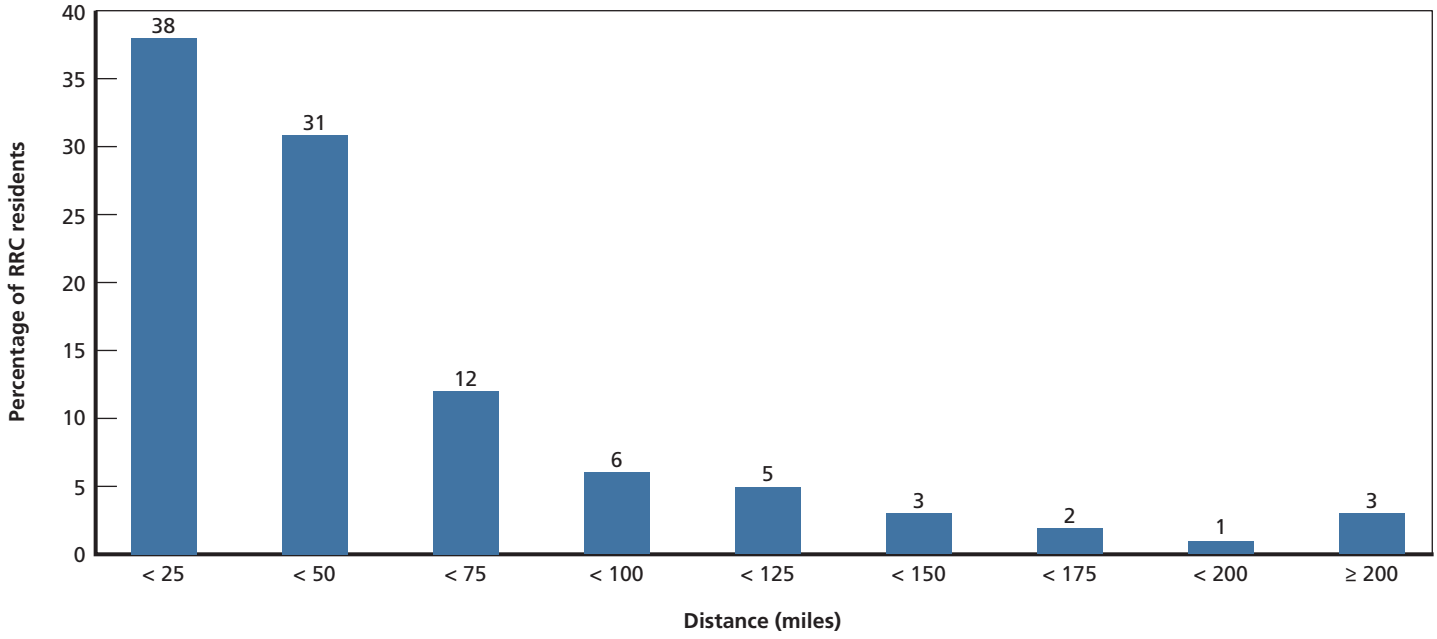
Residential Reentry Center Capacity and Locations

Although BOP contractors operate approximately 200 RRCs, participants asserted that more facilities are needed to meet growing demand. Most returning citizens are placed in RRCs that are relatively close to their homes, but many returning citizens are not (see Figure 5). Deloitte (2016) reported that approximately 32 percent of individuals are housed more than 50 miles from their homes. This reality is attributed to several factors, including the lack of an RRC closer to home or limited bed space at a closer RRC. Participants recognized the challenges associated with siting RRCs (e.g., many communities do not want them, there are zoning restrictions, potential locations are not close to public transportation), and they recognized that the BOP is dependent on contractors being willing to bid to operate in a particular geographic location; however, participants noted the need to evaluate all options for improving capacity.

Conditions of Residential Reentry Centers and Supervised Release

While both the RRCs and supervised release staff are responsible for helping returning citizens find employment and successfully reenter society, they also must monitor the returning citizens' compliance with the conditions of their release. Workshop participants acknowledged the importance of

Figure 5. Percentage of Residential Reentry Center Residents Within Each Distance-from-Home Category



SOURCE: Adapted from Deloitte Development, 2016.
NOTE: Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

accountability and guardrails but expressed concern that overly restrictive rules and conditions can sometimes interfere with an individual's ability to succeed (e.g., getting last-minute approval to pick up an extra shift).

Requirement of Full-Time Employment

Within 30 days of arriving at an RRC, residents are expected to be employed 40 hours per week. This requirement is established in part to help individuals build a financial base. Several participants noted that although the requirement for full-time employment is well intentioned, it may be unrealistic and counterproductive in the long run, particularly as a blanket approach. For example, participants argued that returning citizens often struggle with getting acclimated to the RRC (e.g., adjusting to new staff, rules, and residents), getting accustomed to being back in the community, and reestablishing relationships with family and friends. This transition period can be quite stressful, even without the added pressure to quickly find a full-time job. In some instances, individuals in transitional custody are also required to pay a subsistence fee (based on their gross income), which conflicts with their ability to build a financial base. According to one participant, the requirements of the RRC might lead returning citizens to focus on things that conflict with their individual goals; for example, they might "need to pay subsistence [instead of] community college, for instance. [This starts] them on a track of 'you gotta do what you have to do' rather than [do] what's meaningful to that person; is it ultimately in the community's best interest for someone to be in a position they don't want to be in?"

Recent data suggest that it can take an average of more than six months for individuals released from BOP custody to find their first jobs (Carson et al., 2021). From a practical perspective, some individuals simply might not have the requisite identification to work, since obtaining identification can take weeks (Deloitte Development, 2016). Furthermore, depending on the individual and the programming received in the institution, the individual might not yet possess the employability skills to be work-ready and/or might not have a marketable credential. Some participants expressed concern that, for these individuals, the requirement to quickly find full-time work may be unrealistic at best and counterproductive at worst. Given the circumstances, it is likely that available jobs will be low paying and lack advancement opportunities. Participants noted that, in these cases, individuals are often unable to sustain themselves, which can lead to burnout, frustration, and eventual failure and recidivism. For some individuals, the initial period in the RRC might be better spent developing skills, earning credentials, and preparing for the workforce.

> "Those first 30 days are not easy. The first three months are not easy. To uphold [the full-time employment] rule may not be in the best interests of the individual."

Participants also suggested that the requirement for full-time employment may be too restrictive. Ultimately, several participants expressed the belief that policy should allow for more flexibility and a tailored approach for each individual that is based in part on the individual's interests, goals, and capabilities. Depending on the circumstances, educational programming, apprenticeships, internships, and part-time work may be more beneficial for some individuals. More flexibility in employment requirements could lead to more success in the long term. Depending on the individual, adjustment to the community might be challenging, and part-time work might be most beneficial because it would allow more time for other programming or nonemployment opportunities. The BOP should consider these as acceptable alternatives to a requirement of full-time employment. Such an approach may allow for a more gradual reentry process for individuals who need more time and support and may result in better outcomes in the long term.

Need for Greater Flexibility

Participants also noted that staff can be overly rigid and emphasize adherence to policy over the best interests of an individual. Participants generally acknowledged that, for many staff, it is often easier to say no and follow policy or established processes than to be open to creative solutions to help people succeed.

Participants discussed other common situations that can negatively affect employment. For example, scheduled time away from the RRC must be approved in advance, but employed individuals may be asked to work overtime with little notice. Therefore, to the extent possible, staff should grant requests to work overtime and adjust curfews as quickly as possible. Similarly, while RRC or probation staff are authorized to contact an employer to check up on returning citizens, care should be taken not to unduly burden the employer. Partici-

> "If [the incarcerated individual is] proactive and [tries] to go outside the box to do extra things to succeed, [the institutional staff is] not equipped to help [the individual] with that."

pants argued that overcautious staff can not only jeopardize an individual's job but also deter the employer from hiring returning citizens in the future.

As appropriate, RRC and probation staff should work with employers to ensure that they understand that returning citizens might need time off for justice-related requirements, such as drug tests or office visits, just as any other employee would need time off for dentist appointments or child-care issues. However, participants argued that justice-related obligations should be scheduled outside returning citizens' work hours whenever possible, which may require creativity and flexibility on the part of staff. Ultimately, the rules and conditions of release should not trump the ultimate goal of successful reentry.

Restriction on Associations

Participants discussed a general supervision condition that prohibits returning citizens from associating with others who have been convicted of a felony unless the probation officer approves. This condition is based on empirical evidence that associating with antisocial peers is a criminogenic factor that may increase the likelihood of future criminal behavior (Andrews, 1989; Cobbina, Huebner, and Berg, 2012; Yukhnenko, Blackwood, and Fazel, 2020). Although the participants understood the rationale for the requirement, they also acknowledged that it may be overly restrictive and counterproductive. They discussed several factors. For example, many returning citizens come back to situations in which their friends and families may have criminal records. They may have no one else to depend on for shelter, housing, and food. Isolating formerly incarcerated individuals from the only support that they may have can be detrimental. Furthermore, this supervision condition can make it more difficult for returning citizens to gain advice and perspective from others who have been in the exact same situation, which can be a disservice. As discussed, peer navigators with lived experience can be very important to successful reentry, but this association could be perceived as a violation if prior approval is not granted. Ultimately, more flexibility and thoughtful application of this condition is needed.

> "It's very lonely when you get out, and depressing and scary, and you're not supposed to get [with] people with records who understand your situation."

Greater Tolerance for Missteps

Finally, participants said that, in general, there is a small margin for error for returning citizens. Particularly with respect to violations of RRC conditions, there is a high likelihood that slipups will occur, and individuals should be given opportunities to fail and do better the next time. As appropriate, there should be more flexibility when addressing minor misconduct, particularly if the individual is employed, as even a short period of incarceration will almost certainly result in job loss and potentially damaged relationships with employers.

Ongoing Support

Participants discussed the importance of providing ongoing support to returning citizens, even after they become employed. In some respects, some challenges that these individuals face (such as transportation and child care) are no different from those facing any other employee; however, returning citizens often have additional difficulties.

Participants noted that, in some cases, employers dedicated to second-chance hiring may offer ancillary support (such as coaching, financial assistance, or carpooling) to returning citizens; however, many employers do not have this capacity. Furthermore, participants asserted that many employers are unaware of resources (beyond the RRCs and probation) in the community.

The BOP, in collaboration with the RRCs, can help educate employers about the role that community-based reentry

> "We're joking ourselves if we're expecting people to come home with a certificate and it will all be fine."

organizations may play in the provision of wraparound services and facilitation of connections between parties. Participants asserted that simply knowing that resources are available can eliminate some barriers to second-chance hiring. However, once an individual is employed, community-based reentry organizations can be critical in helping the individual maintain long-term employment. Finally, participants noted that individuals often get stuck in their first jobs, so ongoing support is needed to help them prepare for their next jobs and continued career growth.

Better and More-Timely Data

During discussions, it became apparent that the lack of data on returning citizens after their release can be a significant hindrance in several ways. At a very basic level, BOP participants reported that information technology system constraints can make it challenging to quickly gather data on programming efforts. Internal metrics, such as completion rates, the number of individuals receiving programming by type, and available programming slots in each institution, are not readily available. More-robust information systems with user-friendly interfaces would allow BOP administrators to better understand how the BOP is utilizing its programming and would help identify opportunities for improved effectiveness and efficiencies.

Participants also lamented the lack of data on general employment outcomes following release from BOP custody. As noted earlier, the most recent study was a response to a congressional mandate that tasked the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau with reporting on postprison employment of individuals released from federal prison (Carson et al., 2021). Researchers tracked individuals released in 2010 over a four-year follow-up period. Although the study produced some interesting findings, they are somewhat limited in their usefulness. For example, the study used mainly high-level data (e.g., employed versus unemployed, time to first job, earnings) that were outdated (e.g., did not account for recent changes in some areas, such as policy, programming, demographics, and labor markets).

> "Companies don't know all of the services out there. They just think the person has a probation officer."

> "By the time we get [research findings], it's six to seven years old; it would be nice to find out if our program is doing what we say it's doing."

In addition to timely data, participants argued that there is a need for more-granular outcome data that can be linked to institutional programming. For example, the last evaluation of the impact of participation in FPI on recidivism and employment was published in 1992, and the individuals studied were released in the 1980s (GAO, 2020). Although the results were positive (participants were 24 percent less likely to recidivate and 14 percent more likely to be gainfully employed), better data and more research are needed. For example, it would be instructive for the BOP to know such details as the percentage of individuals receiving a certificate in welding who obtained a job in that field, retention rates, and wages earned. These data not only could provide important feedback to administrators and staff who want to know the results of their efforts but also could provide insight into whether the training is adequate and meets the needs of employers or should be modified in some way. Furthermore, these data could help staff motivate incarcerated individuals to engage in vocational programming. As one participant noted, it would be powerful if the incarcerated population had detailed information about how earning a credential can directly lead to financial stability and a better life. Quantifying successful outcomes can inspire hope and motivation. Finally, data on outcomes can help build the case

for additional investment in the vocational areas that are the most fruitful.

Collecting these data can be challenging for several reasons, not the least of which are resource related. For example, participants reported that, as a self-sustaining entity, FPI does not have the funds for this type of research. The BOP has limited evaluation capacity. More important, according to participants, is the lack of access to more-granular data that the BOP would want, particularly once the individual is released from the institution. That said, more can be done to gather these data, at least in the short term. As noted earlier, a significant percentage of individuals will be placed in RRCs for a period of up to a year after release, and the entities contracted to operate the RRCs are responsible for helping individuals obtain employment and monitoring their employment status. Therefore, the RRCs have access to relevant data at a granular level and could be contractually required to collect and report these data to the BOP.

> "When [returning citizens] release, we don't know where they're going. Most of the time, we only hear about failures, but we don't know why. . . . We don't have insight into whether we need to change the program to better meet industry needs."

The supervised release period is another opportunity to collect employment outcome data, since the median length of supervision is three years (Schmitt and Jeralds, 2022). Participants said that a partnership between the BOP and the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services System could provide better insights into employment outcomes, essentially increasing the window of observation to up to four years after institutional release. There are challenges with this approach; because the BOP resides in the executive branch of government while the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services System sits in the judicial branch, interbranch coordination would be required. Furthermore, according to participants, the system does not routinely or uniformly gather data on supervisee employment outcomes across the 94 U.S. district courts. Resources would have to be dedicated to gathering these data at a level that would be useful to the BOP.

Change in Narrative

Social stigma can be a significant barrier to employment and reentry success, according to participants. The public has many misconceptions about formerly incarcerated people. Often, these attitudes are shaped by mass media that tends to sensationalize prisons as a world of hyperviolence, rampant drug use, gang activity, and ongoing criminal behavior (Foss, 2018; Yousman, 2009). Consequently, there can be a misperception that anyone who has been to prison is dangerous, is antisocial, or cannot be trusted, and this misperception can reinforce existing prejudices. Segments of the public that are more advantaged or that lack knowledge of or experience with the realities of incarceration may be more susceptible to these misconceptions. Participants noted that many incarcerated individuals are intelligent, hardworking, and committed to self-improvement and a better life.

Participants argued that the BOP can help change public opinion by developing communication campaigns that highlight the types of programming that individuals have access to while incarcerated and that highlight successful outcomes. They said that there is a need to humanize formerly incarcerated people by sharing their personal stories and struggles. Of course, these individuals would have to be open to sharing their histories, and care should be taken not to "tokenize" individuals or make them "poster children." Furthermore, the successes that are highlighted should be attainable for most incarcerated individuals rather than exceptions (such as musicians or

> "People don't realize how likeable [some] incarcerated individuals really are. We [as a society] incarcerate a lot of people we are mad at [and not] scared of."

entrepreneurs). Ultimately, the messaging should focus on the important work that the BOP does to return better citizens to the community and, if possible, should quantify the extent that individuals leave in a better state than that in which they entered (e.g., with new skills, training, and certifications). Finally, messaging should be geared toward the general population, as opposed to a particular audience.

Reducing stigma and changing attitudes among employers is a different matter, according to participants. There was some discussion as to whether the BOP is the best messenger to reach this audience. Ultimately, the general consensus was that employers are most amenable to receiving information about second-chance hiring from their peers. Some organizations, such as the Society for Human Resource Management and the Second Chance Business Coalition, are actively promoting second-chance hiring as a "win-win-win." The employers gain a competitive advantage by tapping into a large pool of talent (in an era of labor shortage), the individuals can work and gain financial stability, and the communities get the benefit of reductions in recidivism. Some industry advocates (such as Dave's Killer Bread Foundation) have developed training programs and assembled resources to educate businesses on the issues and misconceptions associated with second-chance hiring, as well as specific strategies to begin and maintain a second-chance hiring initiative.

Participants noted that businesses tend to be data driven and that better data could help change the narrative. While a few employers openly tout their second-chance hiring strategies, collect data, and report outcomes, most do not. In many cases, employers simply do not track the job performance of employee subgroups. In other situations, employers may not be willing to make these data public because of fear of reputational risk (i.e., drawing attention to the fact that the employer hires individuals with criminal records). In any case, the limited data that are available suggest that second-chance hires generally perform as well as or better than non-justice-involved individuals (Korzenik, 2021). Although participants recognized that not all employers need to be vocal about second-chance hiring, they suggested that it would be beneficial if more companies were willing and able to share aggregate outcome data. This data sharing would provide additional support for employers to make hiring decisions based on the skills that candidates possess rather than candidates' criminal records. That said, the issue of outcome data could be resolved in part if the BOP were able to better track its releasees by working with probation departments to get summary data, for instance.

Ultimately, misperceptions and stigma may break down as employers have positive experiences, but individuals must be given the chance to succeed. As for the BOP, participants noted that their part of the bargain is to do everything possible—including teaching employability skills, helping individuals attain some type of marketable credential, and providing ongoing support—to prepare individuals for successful employment.

CONCLUSION

Returning citizens who were incarcerated in federal prisons, particularly individuals with limited work histories or who have been out of the labor market for several years, face significant and well-documented barriers to employment. Although the BOP provides incarcerated individuals with access to vocational and educational programming to help overcome some of these barriers, many individuals will struggle to find formal employment at a sustainable wage on release. To explore the challenges and opportunities associated with improving employment outcomes, project staff conducted a workshop with a group of BOP administrators, community-based reentry service providers, researchers, national employers, and other experts. Workshop participants identified the following key needs, which, if addressed, could lead to better employment outcomes for BOP releasees.

Participants noted that organizational culture and staffing issues can have significant bearing on the agency's ability to prepare incarcerated individuals for successful employment outcomes. Consistent leadership is needed to promote a culture that motivates and supports incarcerated individuals to take advantage of opportunities to improve themselves. Persistent recruitment and retention challenges in both correctional officer and reentry service positions must be addressed, since they can significantly undermine program delivery.

Resources should be focused on ensuring that reentry preparation begins as soon as possible. Staff should engage with incarcerated individuals to determine their interests and begin career planning by establishing short- and long-term goals to work toward. Access to relevant programs that are aligned with the needs of industry should be expanded so that individuals may participate throughout their incarceration, not just during the period prior to release. Finally, the agency should examine its internal policies to ensure that reentry service resources (such as vocational training and RRC placement) are allocated to the individuals with the greatest need.

The BOP must establish stronger relationships with key players (such as community-based reentry organizations, employers, workforce development boards, and business roundtables) in the communities that individuals will be returning to. Developing these partnerships, directly or through intermediaries, can provide the BOP with important insights into the needs of industry so that vocational programming can be better aligned with the job market. Partnerships will also allow the agency to strategically communicate information to industry about the specific skill sets that returning citizens possess and to facilitate connections between job seekers and employers. Participants asserted that these relationships should be established and leveraged while individuals are still in the institution and should carry through their transitions into the community.

According to participants, returning citizens are often unable to take advantage of job opportunities because they lack essential employability skills. There is a need to prioritize institutional programming to address not only basic life skills, such as interpersonal communication, but also employment-specific skills, such as interviewing, résumé preparation, and digital literacy. In addition, lack of identification is a significant hurdle to employment. Efforts to collaborate with states on strategies that allow returning citizens to obtain appropriate identification (such as driver's licenses, non-driver identification cards, and birth certificates) on or prior to release must be renewed and aggressively pursued.

The BOP should consider strategies to better connect incarcerated individuals with resources in the community prior to release. For example, providing individuals with access to online job boards—particularly those that support second-chance hiring—and facilitating virtual job fairs can help returning citizens hit the ground running on arrival at an RRC. Furthermore, connecting incarcerated individuals with community-based reentry organizations can provide critical warm handoffs for individuals who may have greater needs and require additional support or wraparound services. Reentry peer navigators with lived experience can be critical to successful employment and reentry outcomes. The BOP should reexamine its policies and explore how peer navigators can support incarcerated individuals while they are in prison and throughout their transitions into the community.

Several needs were identified that pertain to the period following institutional release (e.g., transfer to community custody in an RRC, supervised release). For example, more RRCs are needed so that individuals may be placed closer to their homes. The policies and procedures of RRCs (such as the requirement for full-time employment within 30 days) and of supervised release (such as the restriction on associations with others who have been convicted of felonies), and how they are applied, should be reexamined to ensure that they are not counterproductive to long-term employment and career goals or unduly strict to the point of setting up returning citizens for failure. As one of the workshop participants noted, "Because of all the new rules and consequences for breaking them, some incarcerated individuals would rather serve their time in an institution . . . than go to a halfway house."[17] Once an individual becomes employed, greater coordination and collaboration between RRC staff and community-based reentry organizations are needed to provide ongoing coaching and support to help the individual sustain employment and build a career. Furthermore, the RRC should ensure that the employer is aware that resources exist and that the burden of supporting the returning citizen is not entirely on the employer.

Finally, the BOP would benefit from more-robust information technology systems to manage vocational and educational program operations and develop the research capabilities to evaluate effectiveness. Granular and timely outcome data are needed to track key outcomes against specific program participation and other variables.[18] These data can help the agency gain insight into which programs are correlated to successful employment outcomes.

The recommendations outlined by the participants were broad, and some may be more readily attainable than others. For example, changing the culture of a large and complex agency can take many years, but incremental gains can be achieved with consistent leadership and sustained focus. The BOP can work to establish agreements with states to help incarcerated individuals obtain identification, but, ultimately, it has no power to mandate states to do so. Other recommendations, such as allowing exceptions to the requirement that RRC residents obtain full-time employment within 30 days, could be accomplished rather quickly with policy change.

The most-impactful recommendations appear to be those related to developing stronger partnerships between institutions and relevant entities in the communities that most individuals will be returning to. Developing stronger partnerships would represent a significant structural challenge, since institutions currently maintain these relationships with only those entities in the immediate vicinity or in the same state. Because institutions routinely transfer individuals to RRCs or residences hundreds or even thousands of miles away, the organizational model will likely require modification. However, a common

theme during discussions was the need to leverage telepresence technology to overcome geographic challenges.

Addressing the needs outlined in this report can lead to better employment outcomes for returning citizens, which can yield benefits not only for these individuals but also for their families, their communities, and public safety.

ENDNOTES

[1] The BOP estimates that the average annual cost of incarceration fee (COIF) was $39,158 per inmate in 2020. The cost for a federal inmate in an RRC was $35,663 per inmate in 2020 (BOP, 2021).

[2] A full list of needs can be found in the *First Step Act Approved Programs Guide* (Reentry Services Division, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2023).

[3] For First Step Act–approved programs, see the *First Step Act Approved Programs Guide* (Reentry Services Division, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2023).

[4] A description of UNICOR can be found at BOP, undated-d. A list of occupational training programs, by institution, can be found at BOP, 2017.

[5] FPI occasionally manufactures goods that would otherwise be made outside the United States and sells them to private-sector firms. The work is produced under the label or brand of the private firm, and FPI's board of directors has to provide approval. A recent example is the production of surgical appliances (GAO, 2020).

[6] RRCs provide a variety of supportive reentry programs to individuals released from prison to improve their ability to transition back into society (U.S. Courts, 2020). All RRCs are expected to assist with employment services, and they all have an employment requirement. See geographic coverage at BOP, undated-a.

[7] In 2022 alone, the total was roughly $90 million from the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Office of Public Affairs, 2022). The overall BOP budget request for 2023 is over $8 billion.

[8] For instance, lockdowns for security purposes interrupt programming and visitation. Concerns about technology misuse prevent institutions from providing access to online educational content or opportunities for building technological skills.

[9] There are some examples of institutional climate and positive attitudes among correctional officers influencing incarcerated individuals' views on treatment (Sauter et al., 2019), as well as examples of culture change among correctional staff involving international exchanges (Hyatt et al., 2021). These examples highlight the idea of improving correctional settings by following a milieu-therapeutic approach.

[10] Research has shown that career planning support is critical for success after incarceration and for coordinating efforts, filling a key gap in existing institutional support, and identifying gaps in existing educational or vocational offerings (Davis, Tolbert, and Turner, 2022; McNeeley, 2022).

[11] Research consistently shows that individuals with the highest risk of recidivism and highest criminogenic need should be placed in programming to address issues to reduce risk (Byrne, 2020). There is also evidence that overprogramming or oversupervising lower-risk individuals can be counterproductive (Duru, Lovins, and Lovins, 2020). The needs addressed by specific BOP programming can be found in the *First Step Act Approved Programs Guide* (Reentry Services Division, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2023).

[12] Peer navigators may be particularly important for individuals returning with mental illnesses or substance use disorders, as peer navigators are used in those areas as well (Corrigan et al., 2014; Portillo, Goldberg, and Taxman, 2017).

[13] The Last Mile, a nonprofit organization, has established partnerships with correctional facilities in several states to prepare individuals in custody for careers in software engineering and web development (Second Chance Business Coalition, undated).

[14] *Second-chance employers* are those that hire individuals with criminal records. Common hiring practices include asking criminal history–related questions later in the hiring process, training human resources to handle applicants with criminal records, providing internships to individuals with criminal records, and hosting or participating in job fairs for individuals with criminal records.

[15] This recommendation mirrors one made by Deloitte as part of a national assessment of RRCs (Deloitte Development, 2016).

[16] A *warm handoff* in this context means starting the process of service provision or other support while the individual is still in the institution to ease the transition from the institution into the community. This way, the individual being released has a level of familiarity with supportive services on release.

[17] See also Kelliher, 2022.

[18] Key outcomes include employment status (part- or full-time), field of employment, retention, and wages. Employment outcomes could also be compared with specific program participation and other administrative data.

REFERENCES

Andrews, D. A., "Recidivism Is Predictable and Can Be Influenced: Using Risk Assessment to Reduce Recidivism," *Forum on Corrections Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1989.

Baer, Demelza, Avinash Bhati, Lisa Brooks, Jennifer Castro, Nancy La Vigne, Kamala Mallik-Kane, Rebecca Naser, Jenny Osborne, Caterina Roman, John Roman, Shelli Rossman, Amy Solomon, Christy Visher, and Laura Winterfield, *Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Research Findings from the Urban Institute's Prisoner Reentry Portfolio*, Urban Institute, January 2006.

Barack, Meredith, "Virtual Job Fair Helps Inmates Find Employment Before Prison Release," WRTV, November 13, 2019.

Berg, Mark T., and Beth M. Huebner, "Reentry and the Ties That Bind: An Examination of Social Ties, Employment, and Recidivism," *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, April 2011.

BOP—*See* Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Bronner Group, LLC, *Federal Bureau of Prisons Education Program Assessment: Final Report*, Federal Bureau of Prisons, November 29, 2016.

Brown, Ashley N., "Goodwill Offers Virtual Reality Experience to Help Enhance Interview Skills, Re-Entry," Spectrum News 1, May 9, 2021.

Bublé, Courtney, "Here's How the Prisons Agency Fared During the Pandemic," *Government Executive*, March 21, 2023.

Byrne, James M., "The Effectiveness of Prison Programming: A Review of the Research Literature Examining the Impact of Federal, State, and Local Inmate Programming on Post-Release Recidivism," *Federal Probation Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 1, June 2020.

Byrne, James M., Faye S. Taxman, and Don Hummer, *An Evaluation of the Implementation and Impact of NIC's Institutional Culture Initiative: Year 2 Update*, National Institute of Corrections, October 2005.

Carson, E. Ann, Danielle H. Sandler, Renuka Bhaskar, Leticia E. Fernandez, and Sonya R. Porter, *Employment of Persons Released from Federal Prison in 2010*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ 303147, December 2021.

Chamberlain, Alyssa Whitby, "Offender Rehabilitation: Examining Changes in Inmate Treatment Characteristics, Program Participation, and Institutional Behavior," *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2012.

Chammah, Maurice, and Joseph Neff, "The Ex-Inmates Going Back to Prison to Collect a Paycheck," *Daily Beast*, January 17, 2018.

Cobbina, Jennifer E., Beth M. Huebner, and Mark T. Berg, "Men, Women, and Postrelease Offending: An Examination of the Nature of the Link Between Relational Ties and Recidivism," *Crime & Delinquency*, Vol. 58, No. 3, May 2012.

Corrigan, Patrick W., Susan Pickett, Karen Batia, and Patrick J. Michaels, "Peer Navigators and Integrated Care to Address Ethnic Health Disparities of People with Serious Mental Illness," *Social Work in Public Health*, Vol. 29, No. 6, 2014.

Davis, Lois M., Michelle C. Tolbert, and Susan Turner, *Evaluation of the Minnesota Department of Correction's Career Navigators Program: Final Report*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1132-1, 2022. As of May 1, 2023:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1132-1.html

DeChalus, Camila, "Federal Prison Working Conditions Are Getting Worse Despite Biden's Promise to Improve Conditions, Staffers Say," *Insider*, March 18, 2022.

Deloitte Development, *Bureau of Prisons Residential Reentry Centers Assessment: Recommendations Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, August 22, 2016.

Duru, Haci, Lori Brusman Lovins, and Brian Lovins, "Does Reducing Supervision for Low-Risk Probationers Jeopardize Community Safety?" *Federal Probation Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 1, June 2020.

Duwe, Grant, and Valerie Clark, "The Effects of Prison-Based Educational Programming on Recidivism and Employment," *Prison Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 4, 2014.

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Reentry Centers Locations," webpage, undated-a. As of July 26, 2022:
https://www.bop.gov/PublicInfo/execute/rrc?todo=query&successPageRedirect=/locations/map.jsp

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Reentry Programs," webpage, undated-b. As of July 26, 2022:
https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/reentry.jsp

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Release Numbers," webpage, undated-c. As of July 26, 2022:
https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_releases.jsp

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "UNICOR: Program Details," webpage, undated-d. As of July 26, 2022:
https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/unicor_about.jsp

Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Inmate Occupational Training Directory*, U.S. Department of Justice, March 31, 2017.

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Annual Determination of Average Cost of Incarceration Fee (COIF)," *Federal Register*, Vol. 86, No. 167, September 1, 2021.

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Increasing Staffing Nationwide Remains a Priority," webpage, last updated July 19, 2022. As of July 26, 2022: https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20220608_hiring_events.jsp

Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Sentences Imposed," webpage, last updated April 29, 2023. As of May 1, 2023: https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_sentences.jsp

Foss, Katherine A., *Demystifying the Big House: Exploring Prison Experience and Media Representations*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.

GAO—*See* U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Georgia Justice Project, "State by State Breakdown of ID Laws," 2017.

Goldberg, Michael, "Dire US Labor Shortage Provides Opportunity for Ex-Prisoners," AP News, July 10, 2022.

Hecker, Ian, and Pamela J. Loprest, "Now Hiring: Digital Literacy Skills Required," Urban Institute, September 9, 2019.

Hepburn, John R., and Celesta Albonetti, "Role Conflict in Correctional Institutions: An Empirical Examination of the Treatment-Custody Dilemma Among Correctional Staff," *Criminology*, Vol. 17, No. 4, February 1980.

Hult, John, "Hiring of Ex-Inmate Troubles Some, Offers Hope to Others," *Argus Leader*, June 16, 2016.

Hunt, Kim Steven, and Robert Dumville, *Recidivism Among Federal Offenders: A Comprehensive Overview*, U.S. Sentencing Commission, March 2016.

Hurwitz, Hugh, "To Fix Our Prison System, We Need Far More Than a Change in Leadership," *The Hill*, December 23, 2021.

Hyatt, Jordan M., Synøve N. Andersen, Steven L. Chanenson, Veronica Horowitz, and Christopher Uggen, "'We Can Actually Do This': Adapting Scandinavian Correctional Culture in Pennsylvania," *American Criminal Law Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2021.

Jacobs, Leah A., and Aaron Gottlieb, "The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism: Evidence from a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 47, No. 9, September 2020.

Johnson, Kevin, "DOJ Names Oregon Official to Head Sprawling, Embattled Federal Prison System," *USA Today*, July 12, 2022.

Josi, Don A., and Dale K. Sechrest, "Treatment Versus Security: Adversarial Relationship Between Treatment Facilitators and Correctional Officers," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, Vol. 23, No. 1–2, 1996.

Kelliher, Rebecca, "Who Holds Halfway Houses Accountable?" Pulitzer Center, September 13, 2022.

Kolbeck, Simon G., Paul E. Bellair, and Steven Lopez, "Race, Work History, and the Employment Recidivism Relationship," *Criminology*, Vol. 60, No. 4, November 2022.

Korzenik, Jeffrey, "Data Show Second-Chance Hiring Works," SHRM Executive Network, May 13, 2021.

Krumrie, Matt, "Why You Should Give Candidates with a Criminal Background a Second Chance," *ZipRecruiter Blog*, October 4, 2016. As of July 12, 2022: https://www.ziprecruiter.com/blog/why-you-should-give-candidates-with-a-criminal-background-a-second-chance/

Lantigua-Williams, Juleyka, "The Elusiveness of an Official ID After Prison," *The Atlantic*, August 11, 2016.

Link, Nathan Wong, and Leah K. Hamilton, "The Reciprocal Lagged Effects of Substance Use and Recidivism in a Prisoner Reentry Context," *Health & Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, December 2017.

Looney, Adam, and Nicholas Turner, "Work and Opportunity Before and After Incarceration," Brookings Institution, March 2018.

Matthews, Esther, "Peer-Focused Prison Reentry Programs: Which Peer Characteristics Matter Most?" *Incarceration*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 2021.

Mauldin, Bronwyn, *Reentry and Barriers to Employment: Lessons from Casey's Investments*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, September 2016.

McNeeley, Susan, "A Long-Term Follow-Up Evaluation of an Employment Assistance Reentry Program," *Justice Evaluation Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2022.

Miller, Ryan W., "Once Incarcerated on Rikers Island, He'll Help New York City Close Jail," *USA Today*, June 30, 2021.

Minor, Dylan, Nicola Persico, and Deborah M. Weiss, "Criminal Background and Job Performance," *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, Vol. 7, 2018.

Muller, Joann, "Modern Cars Are Testing the Limits of Their Computer Hardware," Axios, December 6, 2019.

Muro, Mark, Sifan Liu, Jacob Whiton, and Siddharth Kulkarni, "Digitalization and the American Workforce," Brookings Institution, November 2017.

National Conference of State Legislatures, "Providing Identification for Those Released from Incarceration," last updated May 18, 2023.

Office of Public Affairs, "Justice Department Awards a Total of Nearly $100 Million to Help Reduce Recidivism and Support Successful Reentry to Communities," press release, U.S. Department of Justice, October 5, 2022.

Office of the Attorney General, *First Step Act Annual Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, April 2022.

Office of the Inspector General, *Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Release Preparation Program*, U.S. Department of Justice, August 2016.

Paulk, Pamela D., "The Johns Hopkins Hospital Success in Hiring Ex-Offenders," presentation slides, Johns Hopkins Medicine, September 2016.

Pavlo, Walter, "Bureau of Prisons Is Overworking Its Most Critical Staff Positions During First Step Act Implementation," *Forbes*, March 31, 2022.

Portillo, Shannon, Victoria Goldberg, and Faye S. Taxman, "Mental Health Peer Navigators: Working with Criminal Justice–Involved Populations," *Prison Journal*, Vol. 97, No. 3, June 2017.

Public Law 115-391, First Step Act of 2018, December 21, 2018.

Reentry Services Division, Federal Bureau of Prisons, *First Step Act Approved Programs Guide*, U.S. Department of Justice, January 2023.

Sauter, Julia, Joanna Vogel, Katharina Seewald, Joscha Hausam, and Klaus-Peter Dahle, "Let's Work Together—Occupational Factors and Their Correlates to Prison Climate and Inmates' Attitudes Towards Treatment," *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 10, October 2019.

Schmitt, Glenn R., and Lindsey Jeralds, *Fiscal Year 2021 Overview of Federal Criminal Cases*, U.S. Sentencing Commission, April 2022.

Second Chance Business Coalition, "Get Started," webpage, undated. As of May 30, 2023:
https://secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/get-started

Sisak, Michael R., and Michael Balsamo, "Cooks, Nurses Guard Inmates with US Prisons Down 6K Officers," AP News, May 21, 2021.

Smith, Matthew J., Jamie A. Mitchell, Shannon Blajeski, Brittani Parham, Meghan M. Harrington, Brittany Ross, Brandy Sinco, Daphne M. Brydon, Jennifer E. Johnson, Gary S. Cuddeback, Justin D. Smith, Neil Jordan, Morris D. Bell, Robert McGeorge, Kyle Kaminski, Aaron Suganuma, and Sheryl P. Kubiak, "Enhancing Vocational Training in Corrections: A Type 1 Hybrid Randomized Controlled Trial Protocol for Evaluating Virtual Reality Job Interview Training Among Returning Citizens Preparing for Community Re-Entry," *Contemporary Clinical Trials Communications*, Vol. 19, September 2020.

Smith, Matthew J., Brittani Parham, Jamie Mitchell, Shannon Blajeski, Meghan Harrington, Brittany Ross, Jeffery Johnson, Daphne M. Brydon, and Jennifer E. Johnson, "Virtual Reality Job Interview Training for Adults Receiving Prison-Based Employment Services: A Randomized Controlled Feasibility and Initial Effectiveness Trial," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 50, No. 2, February 2023.

Society for Human Resource Management, *2021 Getting Talent Back to Work Report: A Workplace Survey on Hiring and Working with People with Criminal Records*, 2021.

Trautman, Lars, *Addressing Staffing Challenges in Federal Prisons*, Texas Public Policy Foundation, February 2022.

Tripodi, Stephen J., Johnny S. Kim, and Kimberly Bender, "Is Employment Associated with Reduced Recidivism? The Complex Relationship Between Employment and Crime," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 54, No. 5, October 2010.

Trone Private Sector and Education Advisory Council to the American Civil Liberties Union, *Back to Business: How Hiring Formerly Incarcerated Job Seekers Benefits Your Company*, American Civil Liberties Union, 2017.

Umez, Chidi, and Joshua Gaines, *After the Sentence, More Consequences: A National Report of Barriers to Work*, Council of State Governments Justice Center, January 2021.

UNICOR, "About the Federal Prison Industries Program," webpage, undated. As of May 1, 2023:
https://www.unicor.gov/About_FPI_Programs.aspx

U.S. Courts, "How Residential Reentry Centers Operate and When to Impose," webpage, last updated March 2020. As of May 4, 2023:
https://www.uscourts.gov/services-forms/probation-and-pretrial-services/supervision/how-residential-reentry-centers-operate-when-to-impose

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Federal Prison System: Justice Has Used Alternatives to Incarceration, but Could Better Measure Program Outcomes*, GAO-16-516, June 2016.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Federal Prison Industries: Actions Needed to Evaluate Program Effectiveness*, GAO-20-505, July 2020.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Bureau of Prisons: Opportunities Exist to Better Analyze Staffing Data and Improve Employee Wellness Programs*, GAO-21-123, February 2021.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Bureau of Prisons: Opportunities Exist to Better Assist Incarcerated People with Obtaining ID Documents Prior to Release*, GAO-23-105302, December 2022.

U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Office (District of South Dakota) and Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Post Plea/Guilty Conviction Information*, undated.

Wallace, Danielle, and Xia Wang, "Does In-Prison Physical and Mental Health Impact Recidivism?" *SSM-Population Health*, Vol. 11, August 2020.

Wang, Xia, Daniel P. Mears, and William D. Bales, "Race-Specific Employment Contexts and Recidivism," *Criminology*, Vol. 48, No. 4, November 2010.

Wilson, John L., Sanjukta Bandyopadhyay, Hongmei Yang, Catherine Cerulli, and Diane S. Morse, "Identifying Predictors of Substance Use and Recidivism Outcome Trajectories Among Drug Treatment Court Clients," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 45, No. 4, April 2018.

Wise, Cat, "Leaving Prison Without a Government ID Can Block Access to Housing, Jobs and Help," PBS NewsHour, December 31, 2020.

Yousman, Bill, "Inside *Oz*: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2009.

Yukhnenko, Denis, Nigel Blackwood, and Seena Fazel, "Risk Factors for Recidivism in Individuals Receiving Community Sentences: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *CNS Spectrums*, Vol. 25, No. 2, April 2020.

Zweig, Janine M., and John Blackmore, *Strategies to Prevent Prison Rape by Changing the Correctional Culture*, National Institute of Justice, October 2008.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the participation and assistance of the workshop participants, who are listed in the report, in improving employment outcomes for the BOP's returning citizens. This effort would not have been possible without their willingness to participate. The authors also would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions of Steve Schuetz of the National Institute of Justice; the peer reviewers of the report, Susan Sered and Lois Davis; and the anonymous reviewers from the U.S. Department of Justice.

About the Authors

Joe Russo is a researcher with the University of Denver, where he has supported a variety of programs funded by the National Institute of Justice. His research focuses on institutional and community corrections technologies and on identifying the high-priority technology needs of agencies. He has served in the New York City Department of Correction and the New York City Department of Probation. He has an M.S. in criminal justice.

Samuel Peterson is a policy researcher at the RAND Corporation who has conducted research on a variety of topics in the criminal justice system, including policing, courts, and corrections. His research emphasizes the perspectives of criminal justice and community stakeholders in order to improve criminal justice practices and improve legitimacy. He holds a Ph.D. in criminal justice.

Michael J. D. Vermeer is a physical scientist at the RAND Corporation. His interests and expertise cover topics related to science and technology policy, criminal justice, national security, cybersecurity, and emerging technologies. He coleads the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative, a research partnership identifying technology and policy needs across sectors of the criminal justice system. He holds a Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry.

Dulani Woods is a data scientist at the RAND Corporation. He is adept at data acquisition, transformation, visualization, and analysis, and his research typically focuses on justice and homeland security policy. He specializes in maintaining and operating simulation models and has developed or maintained models designed to estimate potential policy impacts on justice outcomes and defense logistics. He holds an M.S. in agricultural economics.

Brian A. Jackson is a senior physical scientist at the RAND Corporation. His research focuses on criminal justice, homeland security, and terrorism preparedness. He coleads the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative, and his areas of examination have included the design of preparedness exercises and the equipment and technology needs of criminal justice agencies and emergency responders. He has a Ph.D. in bioinorganic chemistry.

Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

About This Report

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the RAND Corporation, in partnership with the Police Executive Research Forum, RTI International, and the University of Denver, is carrying out a research effort to assess and prioritize technology and related needs across the criminal justice community. This research effort, called the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative (PCJNI), is a component of the Criminal Justice Requirements and Resources Consortium (RRC) and is intended to support innovation within the criminal justice enterprise. For more information about the RRC and the PCJNI, please see www.rand.org/well-being/justice-policy/projects/priority-criminal-justice-needs.

This report is one product of that effort. In March and April 2021, researchers from the RAND Corporation and the University of Denver conducted an expert workshop, "Improving Employment Outcomes for BOP's Returning Citizens." This report presents the workshop proceedings, discussing the topics considered and overarching themes that emerged from the workshop discussions.

Other RAND research reports from the PCJNI that might be of interest are

- Joe Russo, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, and Brian A. Jackson, *Community Supervision in a Digital World: Challenges and Opportunities*, RAND Corporation, RR-A108-10, 2021.
- Joe Russo, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, and Brian A. Jackson, *Leveraging Technology to Support Prisoner Reentry*, RAND Corporation, RR-A108-12, 2022.
- Joe Russo, Dulani Woods, John S. Shaffer, and Brian A. Jackson, *Countering Threats to Correctional Institution Security: Identifying Innovation Needs to Address Current and Emerging Concerns*, RAND Corporation, RR-2933-NIJ, 2019.

Mentions of products or companies do not represent endorsement by NIJ or the RAND Corporation.

NIJ | National Institute of Justice
STRENGTHEN SCIENCE. ADVANCE JUSTICE.

This publication was made possible by Award Number 2018-75-CX-K006, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice, the RAND Corporation, or the organizations represented by any of the workshop participants.

www.rand.org

RAND CORPORATION

RR-A108-18