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PRE-PRINT VERSION

Prison-Based Programming: Why It's Needed and What It Can Do*

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Daniel P. Mears, Ph.D., Sarah Lawrence, M.P.P., Amy L. Solomon, M.P.P., and Michelle Waul, M.P.P., are research associates at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. The Justice Policy Center currently is undertaking several large-scale, multi-faceted studies of the reentry process and its impacts.

Prison-Based Programming: Why It's Needed and What It Can Do

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the prison population grew more rapidly and now is larger than at any other juncture in U.S. history. This growth was fueled by two trends. The first consisted of a dramatic increase in admissions to state and federal prisons (see Figure 1). This growth far exceeded, and therefore cannot be explained by, increases in the general resident population. For example, between 1973 and 1999, the rate of incarceration rose from 110 to 476 per 100,000 residents.¹

Figure 1 about here

The second trend consisted of prisoners serving longer sentences. Because of the increasing numbers of prison admissions, the lengthier sentences exerted an even greater impact on prison population growth.²

Figure 2 about here

The growth in the prison population was paralleled by similar growth in the numbers of prisoners released into society, what commonly is referred to as “prisoner reentry.”³ Indeed, despite tougher sentences, almost every offender sentenced to prison eventually is released into society. The vast majority of these offenders are rearrested within three years of release, contributing to prison population growth and in turn to prisoner reentry.⁴

Such growth suggests that prison-based programming – including education, mental health and drug treatment, vocational training and prison industries, and pre-release preparation – should be increasing. These programs can potentially help maintain control of and improve safety in prisons, reduce the rates of recidivism among released inmates, and help inmates address a range of problems that can affect their ability to transition successfully into society.⁵ Yet programming has not kept pace with the numbers of offenders entering prisons. Indeed, the proportion of prisoners receiving programming has steadily declined during the past decade.⁶

Given a context in which prison control is a challenge and prisoner reentry looms large, correctional administrators and policymakers should be hungry for programming that is proven to “work.”⁷ But they would find that until recently there has been little research directly addressing their needs, including the central question: What programs work best and for whom? Increasingly, however, research provides some guidance for how correctional policies might be structured to benefit both prisoners and society.

THE NEED FOR PRISON-BASED PROGRAMMING

Prison-based programming has not kept pace with the dramatic growth in incarcerated offenders. Consider the changes that occurred between 1991 and 1997, among the peak years of prison growth in the U.S. In 1991, 43 percent of prisoners received educational programming. By 1997, not only did this figure not increase, it dropped to 35 percent (see Figure 3). In this same period, rates of vocational programming participation dropped from 31 to 27 percent.

Figure 3 about here

The decline for pre-release programming was negligible. In both years only about 10 percent of prisoners released into society participated in pre-release programs. This low percentage, coupled with the fact that the number of inmates released from prison grew rapidly during the 1990s (see Figure 1), means there has been a corresponding growth in the numbers of prisoners reentering society without the training and skills necessary to successfully transition back to the families and communities from which they came.

Is there really a need for prison-based programming? The short answer is “Yes.” The best available estimates indicate that most inmates suffer from a multitude of problems. For example, up to 11 percent of prisoners suffer from learning disabilities, compared with three percent of the general population.⁸ Approximately half of prisoners have high school diplomas or equivalents. By contrast, over three-quarters of the U.S. population have a high school diploma or its equivalent.⁹

Estimates of employment among released offenders identify a significant challenge to successful prisoner reentry. A study of California offenders suggests, for example, that between 70 and 90 percent of parolees are unemployed.¹⁰ Most of the parolees who obtained full-time employment earned 10 to 20 percent less than like-situated individuals who had not been incarcerated.¹¹

There are other problems as well. Close to 80 percent of prisoners have histories of substance abuse, and about 16 percent suffer from serious mental disorders. Yet, only one-third receive either substance abuse or mental health treatment while in prison.¹² It is estimated that only 10 percent of state inmates in 1997 received any type of formal substance abuse treatment, down from 25 percent in 1991.¹³

Physical health problems also represent a major concern. Rates of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and tuberculosis are up to 10 times greater in prisons than in the general population.¹⁴ And the aging of the prison population means that there increasingly is a need to address the diverse medical problems of older inmates.¹⁵

To compound matters, many prisoners suffer from co-occurring disorders. They may, for example, have physical and mental health problems, including dual diagnoses, as well as educational and employment skill deficits. In these cases, the risks of recidivism, relapse into drug use, unemployment, etc., are compounded.¹⁶

The large numbers of offenders entering and leaving prisons – and the many problems these offenders have – raise two critical issues. First, prisons increasingly will need effective strategies for managing inmates. Second, society increasingly will have to face any consequences associated with not addressing prisoners’ many problems and needs.

THE LOGIC OF PRISON-BASED PROGRAMMING

Why have prison programs? The simple answer is that effective prison programs can potentially increase the stability and order of prisons, reduce criminal behavior, and improve the lives of ex-offenders, their children and families, and the well-being of the communities to which they return.¹⁷ The operative word here is “potentially”: Not all programs are effective, and few if any are effective for all inmates. To understand why, it helps to understand the underlying logic of prison-based programs.

As shown in the first box in Figure 4, individuals come into prison with varying backgrounds. They have different work histories, health conditions, life skills, criminal records, and differ as well in terms of their age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Although few

programs systematically take into account these factors, they nonetheless can have profound impacts on the effectiveness of programs.

Figure 4 about here

Box 2 depicts the range of prison-based programs offered to inmates. These include academic instruction, vocational training, prison industries, and employment services that can aid with obtaining post-release employment. Prisons may also offer a range of additional programs, including life skills training (e.g., how to obtain housing and balance checkbooks), mental health treatment, drug abuse treatment, faith-based programs, and reentry/transitional programming.

Participation in these programs typically is thought to contribute to enhancing the goal of public safety. However, some corrections administrators and researchers have advocated for a broader view of the benefits of prison-based programs (shown in box 5). They point to other long-term goals that these programs may be able to achieve, such as helping ex-offenders become contributing, healthy members of society, promoting the health and functioning of the children and families of ex-offenders, and supporting the well-being of communities to which inmates are released. But how exactly might these goals be achieved through prison programming?

Generally, there are two paths. The first, direct route is through achieving specific post-release outcomes, such as reduced recidivism, drug abuse or addiction, increased employment and housing, improved physical and mental health, and healthier family relationships (shown in box 4). The second, indirect route is through the provision of additional post-release programming (box 3), which in turn leads to similar outcomes.

Often, the combination of both prison-based and post-release programming can lead to longer-lasting positive outcomes than one or the other alone could provide. In both instances, research suggests that fulfillment of the different outcomes in box 4 can contribute to the long-term goals depicted in box 5. Although these outcomes and goals frequently are difficult to measure, they nonetheless can and often do set the parameters for justifying and, ultimately, assessing the merits of prison-based programs.¹⁸

THE NEED FOR TO CLARIFY HOW PROGRAMS SHOULD WORK

To date, few data sources identify precisely the number of inmates who can be served by prison programs (i.e., what is the supply of available programs?). Similarly, few data allow researchers to assess the duration, content, or quality of prison-based programming.¹⁹ In fact, most departments of corrections provide relatively little information about their programs beyond providing mission statements about their operations, desired impacts, and possibly the numbers of inmates who participate in them.

The problem thus arises: How can these programs be evaluated adequately? The answer: Most can not. Evaluations generally are meaningless unless they measure what a program is supposed to change both in the short-term (while an inmate is in prison) and in the long-term (while an inmate is in society). Although some programs may reduce the criminal behavior of released prisoners, this may not be their primary outcome, or it may be an outcome that can be achieved only after other outcomes have been achieved.

The risk lies in applying an inappropriate standard of evaluation and thus concluding, methodological issues aside, that a program does not “work.”²⁰ When held to the sole criterion of reduced recidivism, many programs in fact may not be effective. Other

measures, such as reduced drug use or increased employment, may be more appropriate for assessing their effectiveness. Even if recidivism is the primary focus, attainment of other outcomes may constitute necessary first steps.

Consider a popular, long-standing programming effort: prison industries.²¹ As shown in Figure 5, the more common industries include textiles and apparel, office furniture, wood and metal products, computers, automotive services, medical products, and the traditional industry of producing license plates. Before evaluating any of these industries, a critical first step is to identify the underlying logic of having inmates participate in them. That is, what is participation supposed to do or achieve?

Figure 5 about here

In most instances, prison officials justify inmate involvement in prison industries on the grounds that it can reduce future criminal activity.²² But the focus on reduced crime substantially understates the range of outcomes and goals that prison industries may yield and that frequently are included to justify them.²³

For instance, while incarcerated, participants in prison industries may internalize a work ethic, develop specific work skills, and establish a work history. These changes may indirectly facilitate other positive outcomes, including improved behavior and performance in other areas of programming (e.g., education, drug treatment) and in their day-to-day behavior.

One result of these in-prison changes may be reduced recidivism during reentry. But other post-release outcomes may result as well, including reduced drug use/abuse, stable employment and housing, improved physical and mental health and family relationships.

These outcomes might interact as well. For example, stable employment might result in reduced stress and improved family relations. In turn, this interaction might result in increased public safety and improvements to the well-being of ex-offenders, their children and families, and the communities in which they reside.

The point is that a successful prison industry might successfully affect more than recidivism. Indeed, the ability of many programs to exert a strong and direct effect on recidivism may be relatively nominal, especially given the range of factors that can contribute to criminal behavior. In many cases, measures other than recidivism might represent more appropriate criteria of success.

For this reason, we need to know how exactly a given prison industry is intended to affect participating inmates. Since different industries may imply different orientations and goals, the logic of each must be clearly articulated and then empirically assessed.

The same holds true of prison programs in general. For example, education programs presumably have different shorter-term outcomes than drug treatment programs, and the pathways to longer-term outcomes, including recidivism, also presumably differ. It is this “black box” – the way in which a program is supposed to change participants over time – that needs to be illuminated if we are to provide fair and appropriate assessments of any type of prison programming. With greater understanding about this black box, we also will be able to identify and overcome the many different challenges to effective program implementation.²⁴

PRISON-BASED PROGRAMMING: WHAT “WORKS”?

Despite decades of research on prison programming, relatively little provides solid

guidance about specific programs that correctional administrators should implement. This literature suggests that, generally speaking, education and employment-oriented programs, as well as drug and mental health treatment programs, can be effective along a range of dimensions.²⁵ But for the most part, research is largely silent about which specific programs work and for whom. And it is generally silent as well about how specific types of programs should be implemented.²⁶

The good news, however, is that recent research identifies general principles that underlie effective prison-based programming.²⁷ As Figure 6 shows, some of these principles confirm what common sense might dictate. For example, programs typically are more effective when they address each inmate's particular needs. If an inmate has a solid educational background, it would make little sense to provide educational programming, especially if it was to the exclusion of addressing other needs (e.g., mental health or drug abuse problems). Similarly, programs tend to be more effective when they focus on needs that both can be changed and may contribute to crime (e.g., drug abuse).

Figure 6 about here

Some programs may be effective even if they do not include all of these principles. In general, though, programs that adhere to them yield more positive outcomes. Correctional and program administrators thus can use these principles to guide programming decisions and to determine whether existing programs should be modified.

The integration of different programming efforts (e.g., substance abuse, education, vocational training) can help reduce redundancy as well as conflicts that may arise from differences in how inmates are viewed or treated from one program to the next. In

addition, for any program to have a significant impact, inmates typically must participate for at least three to six months. The basic rule of thumb is that the greater the exposure to programming, the greater the impact. However, much remains unknown about exactly how much programming is ideal or whether programming is more effective at the beginning or end, or throughout, a prisoner's term of incarceration.

Finally, the effective integration of prison-based programming with reentry programs and services represents a neglected but critical strategy for enhancing desired longer-term outcomes. As noted earlier, the transition to society can be traumatic. Numerous obstacles, such as barriers to employment and medical care, can affect the post-release transition.²⁸ Difficulties in obtaining stable housing pose considerable challenges and undermine the ability of ex-offenders to effectively reintegrate into society.²⁹ Aftercare services can be critical to overcoming these obstacles and ensuring that the impacts of prison-based interventions are realized.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Effective prison programming constitutes a potentially critical and cost-effective strategy for promoting public safety and other long-term goals, such as the well-being of ex-offenders, their children and families, and the communities to which they return.³¹ It does not have to preclude a “get tough” approach to sanctioning. Indeed, tougher sanctioning (e.g., lengthier sentences) can go hand-in-hand with prison programming.

But without an increasing emphasis on enhancing and improved programming in prisons, the potential benefits of investing in prisons may not be fully realized. To be sure, there appears to be a modest incapacitative effect of prisons, one that presumably

can be realized without investing in programming.³² Similarly, retribution and justice, which represent important considerations for policymakers, do not necessarily require the provision of prison-based programs.

However, to increase the likelihood that prisoners returning to society will successfully transition into becoming productive citizens, with positive impacts on their children and families and communities to which they return, prison-based programming may represent one of society's best hopes for breaking a cycle of offending. Indeed, incarceration without programming can potentially aggravate the many problems that prisoners have and will face upon release. A cycle of release-and-return thus can ensue in which society suffers the consequences.

Fortunately, correctional administrators can point to an emerging body of research showing significant public safety impacts due to prison-based programming. They also can draw on a set of general principles of effective programming to guide both the implementation of new programs and the modification of existing ones. As they do so, they should strive to define explicitly what these programs are supposed to do, assess their operations and impacts, address particular obstacles to effective implementation, and weed out programs that simply do not work.

If this process is seriously and consistently undertaken by correctional and program administrators, the chances increase that they can garner support from legislatures for effective prison-based programming. They can do so by showing that investing in specific types of programming can result in improved prison management and longer-term post-release outcomes. From this perspective, prison programming represents an investment that can benefit prisoners, correctional administrators, and, ultimately, society.

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NOTES

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² Lynch, James P., and William J. Sabol. 2001. *Prisoner reentry in perspective*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

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¹⁹ Lawrence, Sarah, Daniel P. Mears, Glenn Dubin, and Jeremy Travis. 2001. *Prison programming: A preliminary investigation of knowledge, practice, and opportunities*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.

²⁰ Gaes et al.

²¹ Sexton, George E. 1995. *Work in American prisons: Joint ventures with the private sector*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.

²² Austin and Irwin.

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²⁴ Farabee, David, Michael Prendergast, Jerome Cartier, Henry Wexler, Kevin Knight, and Douglas M. Anglin. 1999. "Barriers to implementing effective correctional drug treatment programs." *The Prison Journal* 79(2):150-162.

²⁵ Gaes et al.

²⁵ Cullen and Gendreau; Gaes et al.; LoBuglio; Wilson et al.

²⁶ Gaes et al.

²⁷ Gerber, Jurg, and Eric J. Fritsch. 1995. "Adult academic and vocational correctional educational programs: A review of recent research." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 22(1/2):119-142. See also Cullen and Gendreau, Gaes et al., LoBuglio, and Wilson et al.

²⁸ Travis et al.

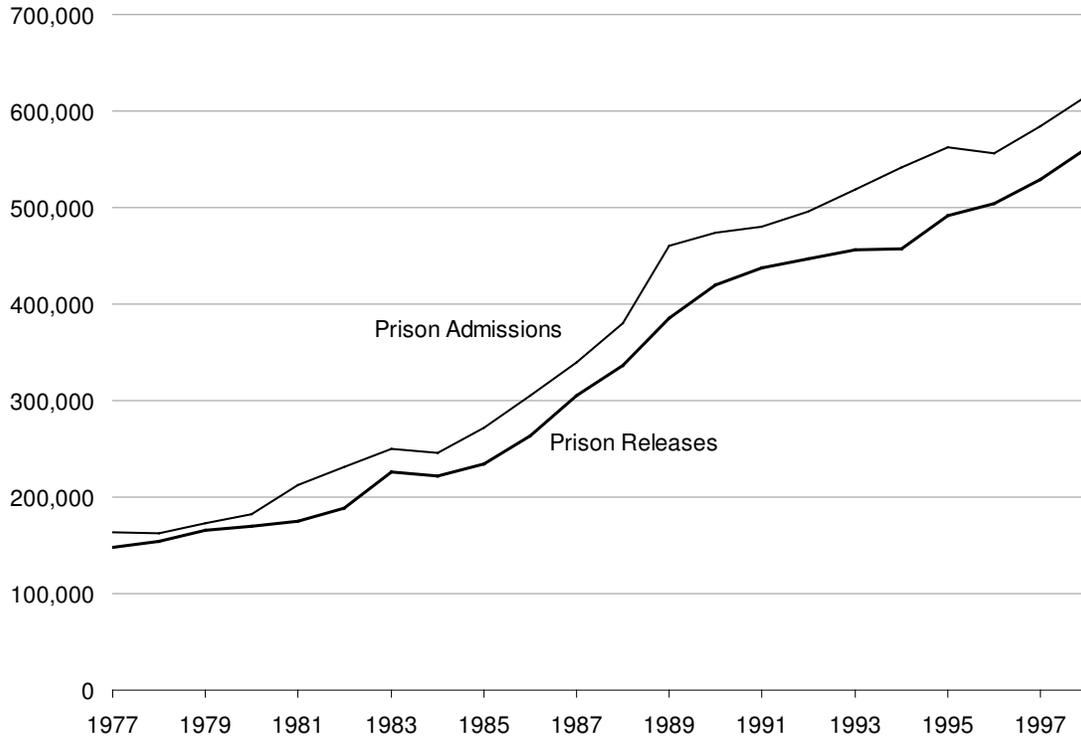
²⁹ Bradley, Katherine H., R. B. Michael Oliver, Noel C. Richardson, and Espeth M. Slayter. 2001. *No place like home: Housing and the ex-prisoner*. Boston, MA: Community Resources for Justice.

³⁰ Cullen and Gendreau.

³¹ Cullen and Gendreau; Gaes et al.; LoBuglio; Wilson et al.

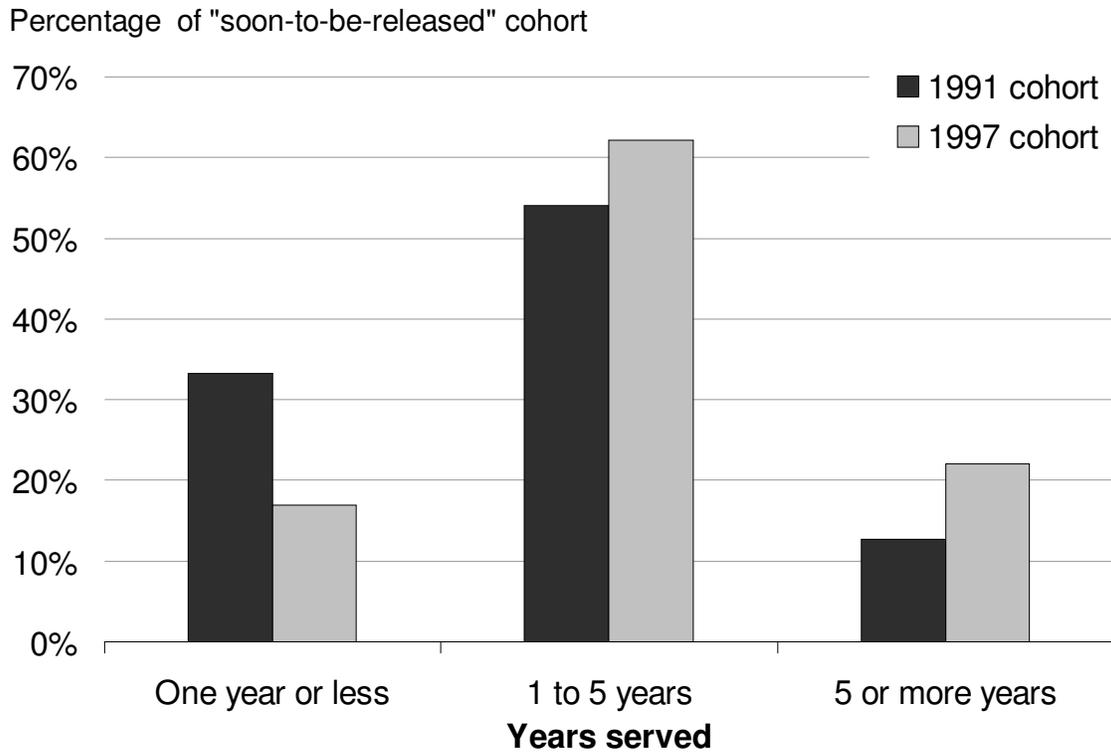
³² Spelman, William. 2000. "The limited importance of prison expansion." *The crime drop in America*, edited by Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman, 97-129. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Figure 1. Sentenced Prisoners Admitted and Released from State and Federal Prisons, 1977-1998



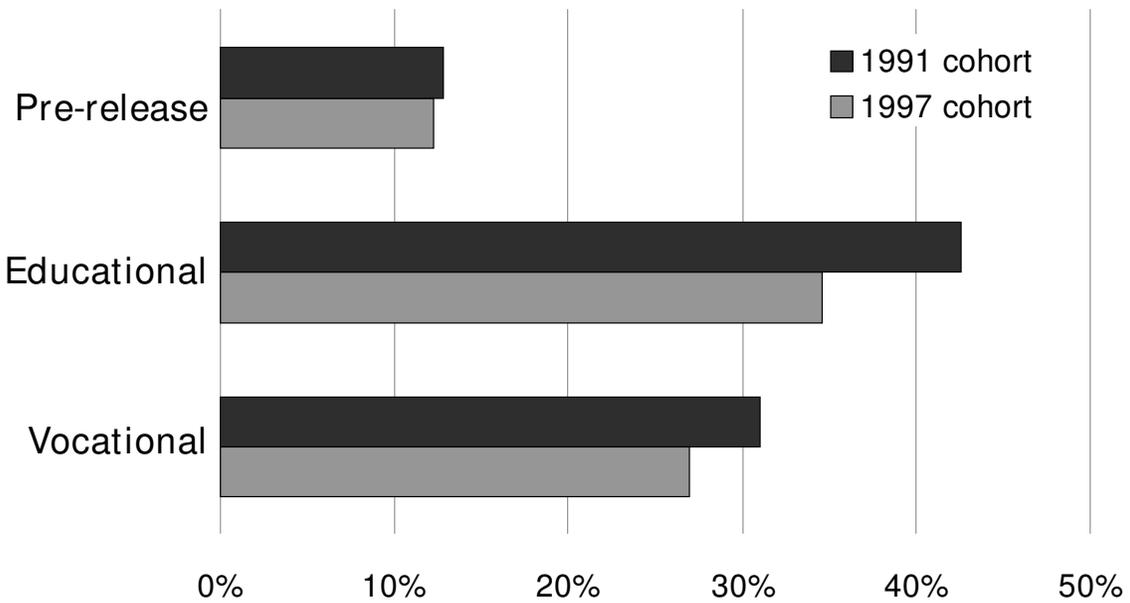
Source: Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2001. *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Based on analysis by James P. Lynch and William J. Sabol of Bureau of Justice Statistics' *National Prisoner Statistics* data.

Figure 2. Prisoners to be Released in the Next 12 Months: Estimated Distribution of Expected Time Served Until Release, 1991 and 1997



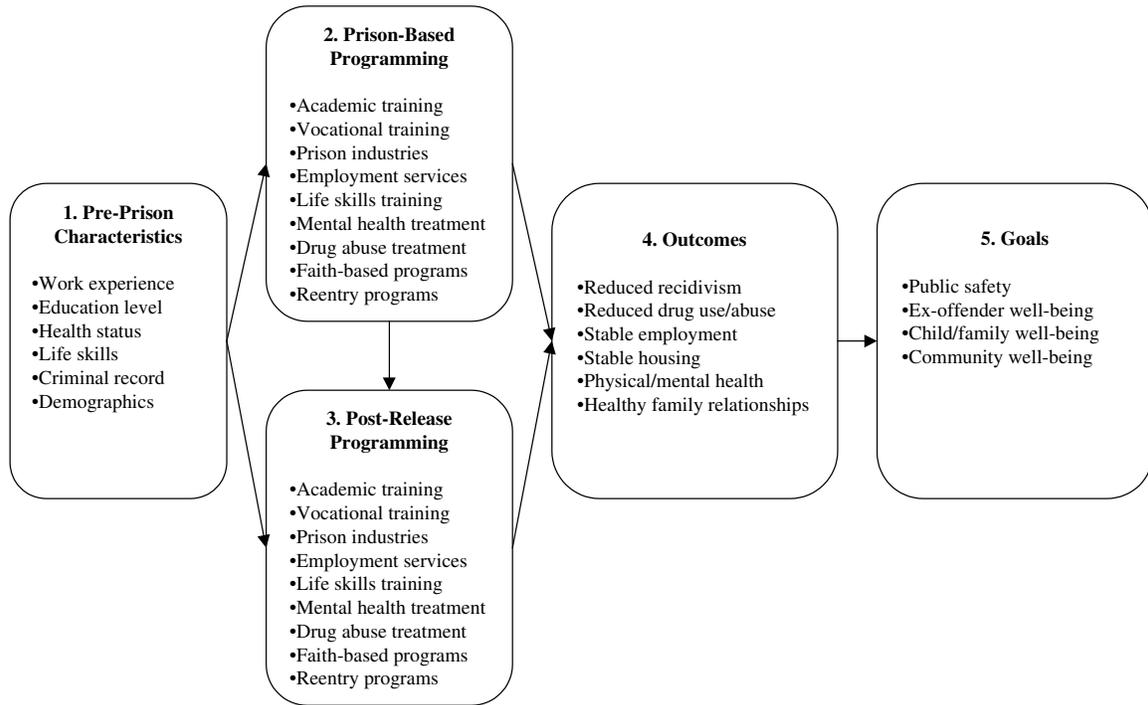
Source: Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2001. *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Based on analysis by James P. Lynch and William J. Sabol of Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Survey of Inmates Correctional Facilities, 1991 and 1997* data.

Figure 3. Prisoners to be Released in the Next 12 Months: Percentage Participating in Prison Programs, 1991 and 1997



Source: Lynch, James P., and William J. Sabol. 2001. *Prisoner Reentry in Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data: *Correctional Populations in the United States: 1990-98* and *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1990-98*.

Figure 4. The Logic of Prison-Based Programming



Source: Adapted from *Prison Programming: A Preliminary Investigation of Knowledge, Practice, and Opportunities* by Sarah Lawrence, Daniel P. Mears, Glenn Dubin, and Jeremy Travis, 2001, Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Figure 5. How Prison Industries Are Thought to Benefit Inmates

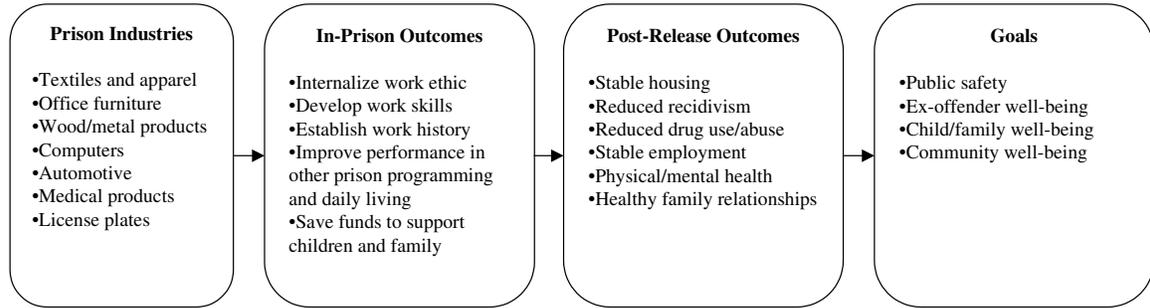


Figure 6. Principles of Effective Programming

- Match offenders' needs with program offerings.
 - Target offenders' needs that are changeable and that may contribute to crime, such as attitudes and prosocial activities.
 - Provide programs that cover each individual's needs and are well-integrated with other prison programs to avoid potential redundancy or conflict across programs.
 - Provide programming for at least several months.
 - Ensure that prison programming is followed by integrated treatment and services upon release from prison.
 - Rely on effective program design, implementation, and monitoring.
 - Involve researchers and practitioners in collaborative program evaluation efforts.
-

Source: Lawrence, Sarah, Daniel P. Mears, Glenn Dubin, and Jeremy Travis. 2000. *Prison Programming: A Preliminary Investigation of Knowledge, Practice, and Opportunities*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute. Based on Cullen, Francis T., and Paul Gendreau. 2000. "Assessing Correctional Rehabilitation: Policy, Practice, and Prospects." *Criminal Justice 2000: Policies, Processes, and Decisions of the Criminal Justice System*, edited by Julie Horney, vol.3, pp. 109-176. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.
