

Charting the Path to Employment After Incarceration: A Research Synthesis of Employment-Focused Reentry Programs

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Hannah G. Cortina, Ph.D., Amy Maniola Allen, M.P.A., Christine Lindquist, Ph.D.,
Jillian Stein, Ph.D., and Jeanne Bellotti, M.S.

Submitted to:

Chief Evaluation Office
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue NW S-4307
Washington, DC 20210
Attention: Evan Murphy and Tara Martin

Submitted by:

Mathematica
P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543-2393
Phone: (609) 799-3535
Fax: (609) 799-0005

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Executive Summary

This report synthesizes findings from recent evaluations of employment-focused reentry programs to inform the Partners for Reentry Opportunities in Workforce Development (PROWD) Grants Evaluation. The PROWD Grants Evaluation is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, to build evidence about ways to support the employment of people exiting federal correctional facilities.

Building on a prior literature review of employment-focused reentry programs (Lacoe & Betesh, 2019), the PROWD Grants Evaluation synthesized recent evidence from rigorous research (randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs) published between 2018 and 2023 that examined impacts on recidivism, employment, and earnings. Key details from 31 publications, including peer-reviewed resources and gray literature, were systematically abstracted and analyzed. This body of recent rigorous evaluations suggests that many employment-focused reentry programs were associated with significant positive effects on employment; many showed significant positive impacts on earnings (when measured), but only a few demonstrated significant effects on recidivism (Table 1).

Overview of the PROWD Grants

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, partnered to support states' provision of employment-focused reentry services to people exiting minimum- and low-security federal prisons and transitioning to residential reentry centers and communities. Services vary by state but include a focus on job coaching, peer mentoring, supportive services, and digital literacy.

Overview of the PROWD Grants Evaluation

In 2022, DOL contracted with Mathematica and its partners, RTI and Abt, to build evidence about ways to support the employment of people exiting federal correctional facilities. The evaluation will explore the impact and implementation of the PROWD grants and will be informed by experts with lived experience, PROWD grantees, and methodologists.

Table ES1. Impacts assessed by publications using rigorous designs

Article	Evaluation design	Recidivism	Employment	Earnings	Employment readiness outcomes
Atkin-Plunk, 2023	RCT	✓	✓	--	--
Barden et al., 2018	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--
Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021	RCT	✓	--	--	--
D'Amico & Kim, 2018	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--
Jung & LaLonde, 2019	QED	--	✓	✓	--
LePage et al., 2020	RCT	--	✓	✓	--
LePage et al., 2023	RCT	--	✓	--	--
McNeeley, 2022	QED	✓	✓	✓	--
Shivy et al., 2019	QED	--	--	--	✓
Smith et al., 2023	RCT	--	✓	--	✓
Tennyson et al., 2022	QED	✓	--	--	--
Wasserman et al., 2019	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--

Specifically, seven of the 11 interventions evaluated in rigorous impact studies measuring employment outcomes showed positive and statistically significant impacts (Tables 2 and 3). In comparison, five of the eight interventions evaluated in rigorous studies that measured earnings outcomes demonstrated statistically significant positive effects. Although these employment and earnings findings are positive, it is important to note that most of these studies did not capture measures of job quality. Future research, where possible, should measure work in the informal labor market and aspects of job quality such as job stability, benefits, and the possibility of career advancement. Similarly, future research should prioritize measuring earnings and should contextualize earnings gains to describe the extent they support people's ability to move out of poverty or obtain a livable wage.

Meanwhile, only three of the 10 interventions evaluated in rigorous studies measuring recidivism showed statistically significant impacts. How recidivism is defined and measured can vary greatly across studies, making it challenging to make broad conclusions. But even among programs that positively affect employment and earnings, affecting overall recidivism outcomes remains difficult (King & Elderbroom, 2014; Lai et al., 2022). Of note, this is a simplified summary of the impact on recidivism, as defined by the individual studies documented in the synthesis, and the definition of recidivism can greatly affect the interpretation and implication of findings. For example, studies that define recidivism as self-reported reincarceration within six months may present more significant findings than those that define recidivism via official data reporting any type of involvement in the criminal legal system within two years of release. Future research should include multiple measures of recidivism, attempt to measure variable impacts by subgroups, and further explore if a causal pathway exists between labor market outcomes and recidivism.

In addition to reviewing rigorous evaluations, this synthesis drew from an expanded body of literature, including older publications and less rigorous program evaluations, implementation studies, and case studies to document reentry program implementation, including common service models, focal populations, differential access to treatment and differential effects by participant subgroups, the timing and continuity of services, partnerships, and peer mentoring. Given the lack of rigorous evidence about the impacts of implementation factors, this synthesis describes facets of implementation and avenues for additional empirical exploration in future program evaluations of employment-focused reentry programs. For example, future research could include rigorous designs to test multiple versions of an intervention with different service components to discern the effects of individual services within comprehensive programs, thus enhancing our understanding of what drives program success. Likewise, future research should explicitly examine equity and inclusion in reentry programs and highlight targeted strategies to address disparities among different demographic groups in access and quality of services and differential impacts for specific subgroups.

Table ES2. Evidence from RCTs by program

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
About Face Vocational Program Plus Individual Placement and Support—Supported Employment (LePage et al., 2020, 2021)	AFVP + IPS-SE for full program, or IPS-SE only	Work readiness (AFVP) plus job search assistance through an assigned supported employment specialist (IPS-SE)	Formerly incarcerated veterans with either mental illness or substance use disorder	Community	12 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
About Face Online System (LePage et al., 2023)	AFOS	Online delivery of work readiness (AFVP)	Formerly incarcerated veterans with either mental illness or substance use disorder	Community	6 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>
Bridges to Pathways (Wasserman et al., 2019)	Bridges	Work readiness, subsidized employment, academic enrichment, social-emotional learning, mentoring, and case management	Formerly incarcerated men ages 17 to 21	Community	12 months	No sig. impact	No sig. impact	No sig. impact
Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021)	n.a.	Work readiness, job search assistance, and retention services	Formerly incarcerated men	Community	18–36 months	Sig. decrease	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Barden et al., 2018)	Next STEP	Subsidized employment with case management, educational classes, and mental health services	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	30 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase	No sig. impact
Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018)	Pathways2Work	Subsidized employment with case management, work readiness and vocational training, and computer classes	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	30 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase	Sig. increase^a
RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018)	n.a.	Subsidized employment with peer mentorship, vocational training, work-related financial support, and child support assistance	Formerly incarcerated people deemed medium or high risk of recidivism	Community	30 months	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration FY2009 Grantees (D’Amico & Kim, 2018)	SCA	Varied by program ^b	Currently or formerly incarcerated people deemed moderate to high risk of recidivism	Varied by program	Recidivism: 30 months Employment: 22–27 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase^c	Sig. increase

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Transitional Employment Program (Atkin-Plunk, 2023)	TEP	Transitional employment with cognitive-behavioral interventions	Formerly incarcerated people deemed low employment readiness and low or moderate to high risk of recidivism	Community	18 months	No sig. impact	No sig. impact ^d	<i>Not assessed</i>
Virtual Reality Job Interview Training (Smith et al., 2020, 2023)	VR-JIT	Work readiness through virtual-reality-simulated job interviews	Incarcerated people deemed moderate to high risk of recidivism	State prison	6 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	<i>Not assessed</i>

^a Participation in Pathways2Work was associated with a significant increase in total earnings over the entire 30-month follow-up period, but there was no significant difference in earnings during the last 12 months (Barden et al., 2018).

^b This study used a pooled sample from seven SCA-funded reentry programs. Programs varied in setting, duration, services provided, and operating agency. About 68 percent of program participants received some form of employment assistance pre- or post-release: 61 percent received workforce readiness training, 30 percent received job search assistance, and 12 percent received vocational training (D’Amico & Kim, 2018).

^c Recidivism, employment, and earnings outcomes were also measured after 18 months of follow-up, with no significant differences between treatment and control groups in any outcomes at that time (D’Amico & Kim, 2018).

^d This study found that the program was associated with increased employment rates, but this included the subsidized employment that was part of the program delivery. There were no differences in unsubsidized employment rates between the treatment and control groups (Atkin-Plunk, 2023). Other evaluations of subsidized employment programs addressed this in various ways. Barden et al. (2018) evaluated employment impacts after subsidized employment ended, so employment impacts for Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce are due to increases in unsubsidized employment. Wasserman et al. (2019) included both subsidized and unsubsidized employment (combined) in their evaluation outcome measure for Bridges, so unsubsidized employment could not be separated.

n.a. = not applicable; sig. increase or decrease = statistically significant increase or decrease; no sig. impact = no statistically significant increase or decrease.

Table ES3. Evidence from QEDs by program

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Study design	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Adult Transition Centers (Jung & LaLonde, 2019)	ATCs	Work release	Incarcerated women	State prison (transition center)	Compared participants' pre- and post-incarceration employment rates with the pre- and post-incarceration rates of nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria and were released from minimum security prisons during the same period (fixed effects models)	5 years	<i>Not assessed</i>	No sig. impact	No sig. impact ^a
EMPLOY (McNeeley, 2022)	n.a.	Work readiness and job search assistance, including résumé review and employer contacts	Incarcerated people	State prison and community	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria and were released during the same period (propensity score matching)	2 years	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
Federal Prison Industries (Tennyson et al., 2022)	UNICOR	Vocational training and job simulation	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants released during the same period	8 years	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
INTUIT (Shivy et al., 2019)	n.a.	Job search assistance and work readiness focused on improving self-efficacy	Formerly incarcerated women convicted of nonviolent offenses	Community	Compared participant outcomes with nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria but were not assigned to the program due to "relatively random" transfer schedules	n.a.	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i> ^b	<i>Not assessed</i>
Occupational Education Programs (Tennyson et al., 2022)	OEP	Vocational training	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants released during the same period	8 years	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>

^a There was no statistically significant difference between the total earnings of ATC parolees and nonparticipants; however, an increase in time spent in an ATC was associated with significantly higher total earnings (Jung & LaLonde, 2019).

^b This program was associated with significant increases in participants' career decision-making self-efficacy during the program period. The evaluation did not include a post-program follow-up period (Shivy et al., 2019).

n.a. = not applicable; sig. increase or decrease = statistically significant increase or decrease; no sig. impact = no statistically significant increase or decrease.

I. Introduction

Jointly funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, under the First Step Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-391), the Partners for Reentry Opportunities in Workforce Development (PROWD) Grants Evaluation is intended to establish foundational knowledge about promising employment-focused programs for people reentering their communities after incarceration in the federal prison system. The existing evidence base on the implementation and effectiveness of employment-focused reentry programs is often difficult to interpret due to substantial variation in program models and evaluation methods (Lacoe & Betesh, 2019).

Therefore, the PROWD Grants Evaluation conducted a research synthesis to summarize the evidence base and identify insights relevant to program development and future research. This synthesis serves as a resource for policymakers who seek to promote evidence-based practices in employment-focused reentry programs and to advance further research on their effectiveness.

Based on a systematic literature review, described in detail in the following section, we present two sets of findings. First, we summarize the rigorous evidence base on the effectiveness of employment-focused reentry programs on recidivism, employment, and earnings outcomes. This set of findings is based on recent (that is, published between 2018 and 2023) randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental design (QED) studies that examined the impact of employment-focused reentry programs on recidivism, employment, and earnings upon release. These findings summarize each study's impact and identify program characteristics found among effective programs and those with no evidence of effectiveness.

In the second section, we draw upon an expanded body of literature including older publications and less rigorous program evaluations, implementation studies, and case studies to identify areas for future research. We discuss service models, focal populations, differential effects by participant subgroups, the timing and continuity of services, partnerships, and peer mentoring. Each of these components is presented as an area in need of additional empirical exploration in evaluations of employment-focused reentry programs. As the goal of this section is to identify areas of growth for the field as broadly as possible, the findings are not limited to recent RCTs and QEDs.

Together, both sets of findings establish foundational knowledge about promising strategies for successfully reintegrating people into the workforce as they reenter their communities after incarceration and areas of promise for future research and implementation practices.

Overview of the PROWD Grants

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, partnered to support states' provision of employment-focused reentry services to people exiting minimum- and low-security federal prisons and transitioning to residential reentry centers and communities. Services vary by state but include a focus on job coaching, peer mentoring, supportive services, and digital literacy..

Overview of the PROWD Grants Evaluation

In 2022, DOL contracted with Mathematica and its partners, RTI and Abt, to build evidence about ways to support the employment of people exiting federal correctional facilities. The evaluation will explore the impact and implementation of the PROWD grants and will be informed by experts with lived experience, PROWD grantees, and methodologists.

II. Methods

A. Literature scan

To identify articles to include in our review, we conducted a literature search in September 2023 using the following databases: Web of Science (includes Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, Conference Proceedings Citation Index—Science, Conference Proceedings Citation Index—Social Science & Humanities, Emerging Sources Citation Index), the Criminal Justice Database, and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service Abstracts Database. We selected these databases based on relevance to the topic and their indexing of a broad range of publication types. Results were limited to publications written in English; that examined U.S. populations; were published since January 2018 (to build off of the previous literature review published by Lacoë and Betesh in 2019); and those that included keywords related to the topic (for example, employment, work), population (for example, inmate, incarcerated person, returning citizen), and type of study (for example, impact, assessment, evaluation). There were no search restrictions based on study rigor (for example, RCT or QED). Appendix A includes a full list of keywords used in the search.

The literature search produced 603 peer-reviewed journal publications matching our search criteria. We reviewed the titles and abstracts of all results to determine whether each publication was relevant to the study scope (that is, pertained to employment-focused reentry programs). Of the 603 publications returned, 25 were deemed relevant for abstraction based on titles and abstracts. Many of the screened-out studies pertained to the relationship between incarceration and employment outcomes, but they were not evaluations of employment-focused reentry programs. The 25 relevant peer-reviewed publications were supplemented by six additional studies of employment-focused reentry programs found in gray literature (that is, not published in academic journals) that were identified by program references within the eligible articles or project team expertise. A total of 31 recent studies were identified for full abstraction using the process described below.¹ Some of the interventions included in this synthesis were evaluated during the COVID-19 pandemic and may have experienced disruptions in programming or possible impacts on outcomes; however, this was not systematically documented in the articles. Moreover, the studies included in this review may reflect the tendency for papers that report statistically significant findings to have a greater likelihood of author submission and journal acceptance (Dalton et al., 2012). This potential bias should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this review.

B. Abstraction process

We created an abstraction form including approximately 100 fields reflecting categorical and open-ended responses to systematically abstract information from each of the 31 publications. We created an accompanying abstraction guide to explain each field and coding option to maximize consistency across reviewers. The abstraction form was designed to collect information about the program or service model, the evaluation design employed, and the outcomes of the evaluation.

Specifically, the program-related fields were intended to categorize the program or service model, setting (federal prison, state prison, jails, or communities), timing of services (pre- or post-release), eligibility

¹ We do not cite some of the 31 abstracted studies in the synthesis because they did not present the results of an outcome evaluation or describe implementation characteristics of a specific individual program.

criteria, program implementation challenges and recommendations, use of partnerships, and types of employment-related services provided (including timing and duration). The evaluation-related fields were intended to categorize the evaluation type(s) (that is, process and outcome). For impact and outcome evaluations, reviewers coded more detailed information on evaluation design characteristics (for example, RCTs, QEDs), the evaluated outcomes (including the definition and results for recidivism, employment, and other outcomes of interest), the length of the follow-up period, and the findings related to recidivism and employment. For evaluations reporting findings from multiple follow-up periods (for example, recidivism impacts at six months, 12 months, and 18 months post-release), reviewers coded the impacts at the latest time point available to prioritize persistent effects. Appendix B includes a full list of variables included in the abstraction form.

Reviewers underwent training on the abstraction form and guide, which included practice abstractions of the same study to ensure consistent data collection across reviewers. We then assigned publications to one of four reviewers. To verify consistency across the reviewers, after the abstractions were completed, 14 studies were randomly selected for quality control. A secondary reviewer re-abstracted each of these studies and compared responses with the original abstraction, discussing and resolving any inconsistencies with the primary reviewer. Few discrepancies were identified (such as minor phrasing differences in definitions) during this quality control process, indicating that reviewers were generally consistent in their abstractions.

We also referenced supplemental literature such as implementation studies to understand and provide context for some program-specific findings described in the sections below. These publications were identified from input from experts and targeted literature searches, but the articles were not systematically abstracted because they did not report findings of employment-focused reentry programs.

III. Effectiveness of Employment-Focused Reentry Programs

In this section, we summarize the impacts of employment-focused reentry programs evaluated in RCTs and QED studies conducted between 2018 and 2023. We present the results of RCTs and QEDs separately. We did not attempt to assess the strength of the evaluation designs within these two categories. This section is based on 12 rigorous impact evaluations of 15 employment-focused reentry programs, as listed in Table 1. Two of the studies (Barden et al., 2018; Tennyson et al., 2022) evaluated the impacts of multiple programs, for a total of 15 employment-focused reentry programs in the 12 articles. Our focus is on understanding the effects of these programs on three outcomes:

- Recidivism, typically rearrest or reincarceration within a certain period after release
- Securing employment upon their release, typically any employment during a specified follow-up period or a binary outcome indicating employment status at a given point in time (employed or unemployed)

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are considered the most rigorous evaluation design due to their ability to minimize bias by randomly assigning participants to intervention and control groups, ensuring that differences in outcomes can be attributed to the intervention itself rather than other factors. Quasi-experimental design studies have less control over confounding variables compared with RCTs, which limits their ability to make causal inferences. However, such studies can maximize rigor by employing carefully selected comparison groups and statistical techniques that minimize selection bias (Shadish et al., 2002).

- Earnings post-release, typically total money earned during the follow-up period or money earned by a specified quarter

We also capture information on other employment readiness outcomes (such as career self-efficacy and job interview skills) some studies reported. In addition to summarizing the impacts of employment-focused reentry initiatives, we describe key characteristics of each program to shed light on the complex interplay between program design, implementation, and measurable outcomes.

Table 1. Impacts assessed by publications using rigorous designs

Article	Evaluation design	Recidivism	Employment	Earnings	Employment readiness outcomes
Atkin-Plunk, 2023	RCT	✓	✓	--	--
Barden et al., 2018	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--
Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021	RCT	✓			--
D'Amico & Kim, 2018	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--
Jung & LaLonde, 2019	QED	--	✓	✓	--
LePage et al., 2020	RCT	--	✓	✓	--
LePage et al., 2023	RCT	--	✓	--	--
McNeeley, 2022	QED	✓	✓	✓	--
Shivy et al., 2019	QED	--	--	--	✓*
Smith et al., 2023	RCT	--	✓	--	✓*
Tennyson et al., 2022	QED	✓	--	--	--
Wasserman et al., 2019	RCT	✓	✓	✓	--

* Shivy et al. (2019) measured participants' self-efficacy related to their career decision making using a scale administered at two time points (comparing changes in career decision-making self-efficacy between treatment and comparison groups). Smith et al. (2023) asked participants to self-report their job interview skills and job interview anxiety at two time points and compared changes in these outcomes between treatment and comparison groups.

A. Evidence of effectiveness from RCTs

Based on this body of recent rigorous evaluations, overall conclusions about the effectiveness of employment-focused reentry programs indicate that most evaluations found significant positive effects on employment; many showed significant positive effects on earnings when measured; but only a few demonstrated significant effects on recidivism.

To understand the outcomes achieved by the programs that were recently evaluated using rigorous methods, we first describe impact findings from RCTs. Table 2 describes 10 employment-focused reentry programs studied through the 12 impact studies noted above, which examined recidivism, employment, or earnings outcomes. The table summarizes the key services that were evaluated, the study population, the setting, the evaluation follow-up period, and the impact on outcomes observed.

Key services varied across programs. **Work readiness training** teaches participants job search skills (such as interviewing or résumé writing) or positive workplace behavior in a group setting. In contrast, **job search assistance** uses a one-on-one approach with an employment specialist to identify job openings

and provide support during the application process, such as individualized résumé feedback. Although these two approaches cover similar topics, their largest differentiator is group- versus individual-based programming. **Vocational training** prepares participants for a specific occupation or industry, sometimes including a certification. **Subsidized employment** is typically a temporary job offered post-release, which is paid for by an external funder,² whereas **work release** allows incarcerated people to leave a correctional facility to work for a private employer pre-release. Additionally, some programs include **supplemental services**, such as case management, peer mentoring, or behavioral health services. Most programs incorporated multiple services, and evaluations typically compared people who received all services with people who received none, which means that outcomes can only be attributed to the program as a whole, not to a specific component. We discuss additional details about components of the program service models and focal populations later in the synthesis.

Across the RCTs reviewed that measured recidivism, there were minimal program impacts on recidivism. Only two of the seven studies found a statistically significant reduction in this outcome: the Intensive Job Assistance and RecycleForce programs (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021; Barden et al., 2018). Both evaluations employed lengthy follow-up periods, with Intensive Job Assistance tracking outcomes for 18 to 36 months and RecycleForce following up for 30 months. Both evaluations noted significant effects on recidivism at the latest follow-up point measured, which suggests long-term program impacts on this outcome. RecycleForce was also associated with an increase in employment, but the evaluation of Intensive Job Assistance did not assess employment outcomes.

In terms of the program model, both programs assisted formerly incarcerated people in the community, although RecycleForce specifically focused on serving people at medium to high risk of reoffending. Each program offered different services. Intensive Job Assistance provided work readiness training, job search assistance, and retention services (including continuous support for the participant upon job placement). In contrast, RecycleForce offered subsidized employment in one of three organizations, including a recycling plant, along with peer mentorship, vocational training, work-related financial support, and child support assistance. The five other RCTs that assessed recidivism did not detect significant reductions in this outcome (Atkin-Plunk, 2023; Barden et al., 2018; D'Amico & Kim, 2018; Wasserman et al., 2019). These programs differed in nearly all aspects. For example, Bridges to Pathways (Bridges); Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Next STEP); Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Pathways2Work); and the Transitional Employment Program (TEP) worked with formerly incarcerated people in the community, while grantees in the Second Chance Act (SCA) Adult Demonstration Programs for fiscal year 2009 (FY2009) served various settings. Although Bridges, Next STEP, and Pathways2Work each provided subsidized employment, their remaining services did not overlap. Follow-up periods in the studies of these five programs ranged from 12 to 36 months. In sum, although none of these programs showed significant reductions in recidivism for their participants, it is difficult to ascertain a common factor between them that may have impeded success.

Employment outcomes proved more promising—six of the nine RCTs that measured employment outcomes found a statistically significant positive impact on employment at the latest follow-up period examined: the About Face Vocational Program Plus Individual Placement and Support—Supported Employment (AFVP + IPS-SE), Next STEP, Pathways2Work, RecycleForce, SCA FY2009 Adult Demonstration

² Funders can be federal, state, or local government agencies, or private or nonprofit organizations. Federal government agencies funded all subsidized employment programs included in this synthesis.

Programs, and Virtual Reality Job Interview Training (VR-JIT) programs (LePage et al., 2020; Barden et al., 2018; D'Amico & Kim, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). AFVP + IPS-SE, Bridges, Pathways2Work, and VR-JIT programs provided work readiness training, while Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce each provided subsidized employment³ to their participants. Other services, such as vocational training, job search assistance, financial support, and cognitive behavioral interventions, did not overlap among the programs. It is important to note the follow-up periods for assessing employment outcomes varied across the program evaluations. The Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce evaluations each tracked participant outcomes for 30 months; the AFVP + IPS-SE evaluation had a 12-month follow-up period; and the VR-JIT program evaluation tracked outcomes for only six months.

Similarly demonstrating promise, four of the six RCTs that measured earnings outcomes found a statistically significant positive impact on earnings in the latest follow-up period examined: AFVP + IPS-SE, Pathways2Work, RecycleForce, and SCA FY2009 Adult Demonstration Programs (LePage et al., 2020; Barden et al., 2018; D'Amico & Kim, 2018). Evaluations measuring both employment and earnings generally found the same results for both outcomes except for the evaluation of Next STEP, which showed an increase in the likelihood of employment during the last year of the 30-month follow-up period but no statistically significant impact on cumulative earnings over the 30 months or in the last year. These findings suggest that employed Next STEP participants may have secured employment later in the follow-up period but did not necessarily have higher wages or work more hours at those jobs than comparison group members. The other two programs that were evaluated using the same outcomes and follow-up period, Pathways2Work and RecycleForce, demonstrated statistically significant improvements in both employment and earnings.

Of the five RCTs that assessed program impact on all three outcomes of interest, only RecycleForce, as detailed earlier in this section, was associated with significant positive effects on all outcomes.

B. Evidence of effectiveness from QEDs

Next, we summarize recent evidence from QEDs consisting of the five programs outlined in Table 3. When assessing the evidence for impact on recidivism, employment, and earnings, one program (EMPLOY) demonstrated statistically significant positive impacts on all three outcomes. The evaluation of one other program, INTUIT, did not report any of these outcomes; however, the QED evaluation found that program participation was associated with increased career decision-making self-efficacy (Shivy et al., 2019). EMPLOY and INTUIT both incorporated work readiness training and individualized job search assistance. However, EMPLOY provided continuous pre- and post-release services, and its evaluation used a two-year follow-up period for assessing outcomes. In contrast, INTUIT services were provided post-release only, and its evaluation did not follow up with participants after the program ended.

³ The subsidized employment components of Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce ended before employment outcomes were measured, indicating that the observed employment increases were likely due to employment in unsubsidized jobs.

Table 2. Evidence from RCTs by program

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
About Face Vocational Program Plus Individual Placement and Support—Supported Employment (LePage et al., 2020, 2021)	AFVP + IPS-SE for full program, or IPS-SE only	Work readiness (AFVP) plus job search assistance through an assigned supported employment specialist (IPS-SE)	Formerly incarcerated veterans with either mental illness or substance use disorder	Community	12 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
About Face Online System (LePage et al., 2023)	AFOS	Online delivery of work readiness (AFVP)	Formerly incarcerated veterans with either mental illness or substance use disorder	Community	6 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>
Bridges to Pathways (Wasserman et al., 2019)	Bridges	Work readiness, subsidized employment, academic enrichment, social-emotional learning, mentoring, and case management	Formerly incarcerated men ages 17 to 21	Community	12 months	No sig. impact	No sig. impact	No sig. impact
Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021)	n.a.	Work readiness, job search assistance, and retention services	Formerly incarcerated men	Community	18–36 months	Sig. decrease	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Barden et al., 2018)	Next STEP	Subsidized employment with case management, educational classes, and mental health services	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	30 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase	No sig. impact
Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018)	Pathways2Work	Subsidized employment with case management, work readiness and vocational training, and computer classes	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	30 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase	Sig. increase^a
RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018)	n.a.	Subsidized employment with peer mentorship, vocational training, work-related financial support, and child support assistance	Formerly incarcerated people deemed medium or high risk of recidivism	Community	30 months	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration FY2009 Grantees (D’Amico & Kim, 2018)	SCA	Varied by program ^b	Currently or formerly incarcerated people deemed moderate to high risk of recidivism	Varied by program	Recidivism: 30 months Employment: 22–27 months	No sig. impact	Sig. increase^c	Sig. increase

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Transitional Employment Program (Atkin-Plunk, 2023)	TEP	Transitional employment with cognitive-behavioral interventions	Formerly incarcerated people deemed low employment readiness and low or moderate to high risk of recidivism	Community	18 months	No sig. impact	No sig. impact ^d	<i>Not assessed</i>
Virtual Reality Job Interview Training (Smith et al., 2020, 2023)	VR-JIT	Work readiness through virtual-reality-simulated job interviews	Incarcerated people deemed moderate to high risk of recidivism	State prison	6 months	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	<i>Not assessed</i>

^a Participation in Pathways2Work was associated with a significant increase in total earnings over the entire 30-month follow-up period, but there was no significant difference in earnings during the last 12 months (Barden et al., 2018).

^b This study used a pooled sample from seven SCA-funded reentry programs. Programs varied in setting, duration, services provided, and operating agency. About 68 percent of program participants received some form of employment assistance pre- or post-release: 61 percent received workforce readiness training, 30 percent received job search assistance, and 12 percent received vocational training (D’Amico & Kim, 2018).

^c Recidivism, employment, and earnings outcomes were also measured after 18 months of follow-up, with no significant differences between treatment and control groups in any outcomes at that time (D’Amico & Kim, 2018).

^d This study found that the program was associated with increased employment rates, but this included the subsidized employment that was part of the program delivery. There were no differences in unsubsidized employment rates between the treatment and control groups (Atkin-Plunk, 2023). Other evaluations of subsidized employment programs addressed this in various ways. Barden et al. (2018) evaluated employment impacts after subsidized employment ended, so employment impacts for Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce are due to increases in unsubsidized employment. Wasserman et al. (2019) included both subsidized and unsubsidized employment (combined) in their evaluation outcome measure for Bridges, so unsubsidized employment could not be separated.

n.a. = not applicable; sig. increase or decrease = statistically significant increase or decrease; no sig. impact = no statistically significant increase or decrease.

The other recent QEDs included in our analysis showed no significant effects on recidivism, employment, or earnings outcomes. Evaluations of two programs measured recidivism and found no impact (UNICOR and Occupational Education Programs [OEP]; Tennyson et al., 2022). Both UNICOR and OEP focused on vocational training, with UNICOR including a job simulation as an aspect of this training (Tennyson et al., 2022). An evaluation of Adult Transition Centers (ATCs), a work release program, showed no impact on employment or earnings and did not measure recidivism (Jung & LaLonde, 2019).

In summary, evidence from recent RCTs and QEDs of employment-focused reentry programs is mixed but generally positive, with nine of the 15 programs demonstrating a favorable impact on at least one outcome (and no unfavorable impacts on any outcomes). However, positive impacts are more consistent for employment and earnings outcomes (found in seven of the 11 programs that measured employment and in five of the eight programs that measured earnings) than recidivism outcomes (found in three of the 10 programs that measured recidivism).

Table 3. Evidence from QEDs by program

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Study design	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Adult Transition Centers (Jung & LaLonde, 2019)	ATCs	Work release	Incarcerated women	State prison (transition center)	Compared participants' pre- and post-incarceration employment rates with the pre- and post-incarceration rates of nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria and were released from minimum security prisons during the same period (fixed effects models)	5 years	<i>Not assessed</i>	No sig. impact	No sig. impact ^a
EMPLOY (McNeeley, 2022)	n.a.	Work readiness and job search assistance, including résumé review and employer contacts	Incarcerated people	State prison and community	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria and were released during the same period (propensity score matching)	2 years	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
Federal Prison Industries (Tennyson et al., 2022)	UNICOR	Vocational training and job simulation	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants released during the same period	8 years	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
INTUIT (Shivy et al., 2019)	n.a.	Job search assistance and work readiness focused on improving self-efficacy	Formerly incarcerated women convicted of nonviolent offenses	Community	Compared participant outcomes with nonparticipants who met eligibility criteria but were not assigned to the program due to "relatively random" transfer schedules	n.a.	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i> ^b	<i>Not assessed</i>
Occupational Education Programs (Tennyson et al., 2022)	OEP	Vocational training	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	Compared participant outcomes with matched nonparticipants released during the same period	8 years	No sig. impact	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>

^a There was no statistically significant difference between the total earnings of ATC parolees and nonparticipants; however, an increase in time spent in an ATC was associated with significantly higher total earnings (Jung & LaLonde, 2019).

^b This program was associated with significant increases in participants' career decision-making self-efficacy during the program period. The evaluation did not include a post-program follow-up period (Shivy et al., 2019).

n.a. = not applicable; sig. increase or decrease = statistically significant increase or decrease; no sig. impact = no statistically significant increase or decrease.

IV. Areas for Additional Exploration in Employment-Focused Reentry Programming

Although the previous section focused on only the most recent and most rigorous evaluations of employment-focused reentry programs, some topics of specific interest for the PROWD Grants Evaluation, including service models, focal populations, continuity of services, partnerships, peer mentoring, and the federal setting, could not be adequately addressed by that set of studies. Therefore, in this section, we draw upon an expanded body of literature to glean additional insights about specific aspects of employment-focused reentry programs that may be important to successful program implementation and that need additional research.⁴ This section also discusses what is known about the role of the federal correctional setting in program implementation and explores certain program components (including peer mentoring) in more detail.

The findings presented in this section draw upon the 12 RCT and QED evaluations from 2018 to 2023 discussed in the previous section (listed in Table 1) and research on the additional programs described in Table 4, totaling 30 programs.

⁴ The expanded literature includes several additional sources, such as implementation studies, less rigorous outcome studies, publications outside of our original year parameters (that is, published before 2018), and those that provide further context on an area of interest for future exploration. The expanded literature was identified through targeted searches to address topics needing supplemental information. When possible, we prioritize the findings from more rigorous studies but use the expanded literature to advance recommendations for future program implementation and research. The added studies were abstracted using the same process described in the Methods section.

Table 4. Expanded evidence, including older studies (pre-2018) and additional study types

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Study type	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Center for Employment Opportunities (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012)	CFEO	Subsidized employment with work readiness training	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	RCT	36 months	Sig. decrease	No sig. Impact	No sig. Impact
DC Central Kitchen (Matthews et al., 2020)	DCKK	Vocational training and peer mentorship	Formerly incarcerated people	Community	Descriptive case study	n.a.	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Department of Education’s State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (Baloch & Jennings, 2018)	RSA	Work readiness, vocational training, job search assistance, and disability-related services	Incarcerated people with disabilities	State prison	Outcome study (not RCT or QED)	NA	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	<i>Not assessed</i>
Federal Correctional Education Programs (Harer, 1995; Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013)	n.a.	Vocational training and other educational programs	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	QED	36 months	Sig. decrease	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Employment Services for Ex-Offenders (Newton et al., 2018; Bierens & Carvalho, 2011)	ESEO	Job search assistance with follow-up support after job placement	Recently incarcerated people	Community	RCT	NA	Varied*	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Florida Department of Corrections Work Release (Bales et al., 2016)	FDOC Work Release	Work release	Incarcerated people deemed low risk	State prison	Outcome study (not RCT or QED)	36 months	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	<i>Not assessed</i>
Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release (Bellotti et al., 2018)	LEAP	Work readiness training, vocational training, job search assistance, individual employment plans, and career and life skills counseling	Incarcerated people approaching release	Jail and community	Implementation study	n.a.	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Milwaukee Safe Street Prisoner Release Initiative (Cook et al., 2015)	PRI	Subsidized employment and job search assistance with access to work readiness, vocational training, and other services	Incarcerated people deemed high risk	State prison and community	RCT	12 months	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase

Program	Abbreviation	Services	Population	Setting	Study type	Follow-up period	Impact on recidivism	Impact on employment	Impact on earnings
Minnesota Department of Corrections Work Release (Duwe, 2015)	MnDOC Work Release	Work release	Incarcerated people deemed low risk	State prison	QED	24–72 months	Sig. decrease	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
National Supported Work Demonstration Project (Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000)	NSWDP	Subsidized employment	Recently incarcerated people	Community	RCT	Up to 36 months	No sig. Impact	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
Post-Release Employment Project (Davis et al., 2013; Saylor & Gaes, 1997)	PREP	Vocational training, industrial work, or apprenticeship	Incarcerated people	Federal prison	QED	NA	<i>Not assessed</i>	Sig. increase	No sig. Impact
Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (Cox, 2016)	PIECP	Private sector employment for “market wage” during incarceration	Incarcerated people	State prison (minimum or medium security)	QED	24–90 months	No sig. Impact	Sig. increase	Sig. increase
Reentry1 and Reentry2 (Buck Willison et al., 2014)	Reentry1/2	Improving access to work readiness, education, apprenticeships, family support, counseling, and other services	Incarcerated people at medium or high risk	Jail and community	QED	> 12 months	Sig. decrease	<i>Not assessed</i>	<i>Not assessed</i>
STRIVE (Farabee et al., 2014)	n.a.	Vocational training, work readiness training, and job search assistance	Recently incarcerated people	Community	RCT	12 months	No sig. Impact	No sig. Impact	<i>Not assessed</i>
Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (Hill et al., 2017)	WCTII	Vocational and work readiness training with access to seminars with potential employers	Incarcerated people	State prison	QED	Recidivism: 36 months Employment: 3 months	Sig. decrease	No sig. Impact	<i>Not assessed</i>

*The program decreases the risk of recidivism for participants over the age of 27 or 36 (depending on the site) but increases the risk of recidivism for other participants.

n.a. = not applicable; NA = not available; sig. increase or decrease = statistically significant increase or decrease; no sig. impact = no statistically significant increase or decrease.

A. Understanding program service models

As a first step in understanding the variable impacts of employment-focused reentry programs, we discuss the use of various service models among the 30 programs. Service model characteristics explored in this section include employment services delivered, populations served, and the timing and continuity of service delivery models.

1. Employment services

Landscape and frequency of employment services offered. Employment-focused reentry programs can include a variety of services that center on different populations, needs, and skill sets. Most programs included in this review offer a combination of services, such as work readiness training, job search assistance, vocational training, subsidized employment, work release, and other supplemental services (for example, case management, peer mentoring, or behavioral health). Table 5 provides an overview of the types of services offered by each of the 30 programs.

Table 5. Types of employment services provided by programs included in the literature review

Program	Abbreviation	Work readiness training	Job search assistance	Vocational training	Subsidized employment	Work release	Supplemental services
Recent rigorous evaluations							
About Face Vocational Program Plus Individual Placement and Support—Supported Employment (LePage et al., 2020, 2021)	AFVP + IPS-SE for full program, or IPS-SE only	--	✓	--	--	--	--
About Face Online System (LePage et al., 2023)	AFOS	✓	--	--	--	--	--
Bridges to Pathways (Wasserman et al., 2019)	Bridges	✓	--	--	✓	--	✓
Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021)	n.a.	✓	✓	--	--	--	✓
Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Barden et al., 2018)	Next STEP	✓	--	--	✓	--	✓
Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018)	Pathways2Work	✓	--	--	✓	--	✓
RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018)	n.a.	✓	--	✓	✓	--	✓
Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration FY2009 Grantees (D'Amico & Kim, 2018)	SCA	Services varied by program.	Services varied by program.	Services varied by program.	Services varied by program.	Services varied by program.	Services varied by program.
Transitional Employment Program (Atkin-Plunk, 2023)	TEP	--	--	--	✓	--	✓

Program	Abbreviation	Work readiness training	Job search assistance	Vocational training	Subsidized employment	Work release	Supplemental services
Virtual Reality Job Interview Training (Smith et al., 2020, 2023)	VR-JIT	✓	--	--	--	--	--
Adult Transition Centers (Jung & LaLonde, 2019)	ATCs	--	--	--	--	✓	--
EMPLOY (McNeeley, 2022)	n.a.	✓	✓	--	--	--	--
Federal Prison Industries (Tennyson et al., 2022)	UNICOR	--	--	✓	--	--	--
INTUIT (Shivy et al., 2019)	n.a.	✓	✓	--	--	--	✓
Occupational Education Programs (Tennyson et al., 2022)	OEP	--	--	✓	--	--	--
Expanded literature							
Center for Employment Opportunities (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012) ^a	CFEO	✓	--	--	✓	--	--
DC Central Kitchen (Matthews et al., 2020)	DCKK	--	--	✓	--	--	✓
Department of Education's State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (Baloch & Jennings, 2018) ^a	RSA	--	✓	✓	--	--	✓
Federal Correctional Education Programs (Harer, 1995; Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013) ^a	n.a.	--	--	✓*	--	--	--
Employment Services for Ex-Offenders (Newton et al., 2018; Bierens & Carvalho, 2011) ^a	ESEO	--	✓	--	--	--	✓
Florida Department of Corrections Work Release (Bales et al., 2016) ^a	FDOC Work Release	--	--	--	--	✓	--
Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release (Bellotti et al., 2018)	LEAP	✓	✓	✓	--	--	✓
Milwaukee Safe Street Prisoner Release Initiative (Cook et al., 2015) ^a	PRI	✓	✓	✓	✓	--	--

Program	Abbreviation	Work readiness training	Job search assistance	Vocational training	Subsidized employment	Work release	Supplemental services
Minnesota Department of Corrections Work Release (Duwe, 2015) ^a	MnDOC Work Release	--	--	--	--	✓	--
National Supported Work Demonstration Project (Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000)	NSWDP	--	--	--	✓	--	--
Post-Release Employment Project (Davis et al., 2013; Saylor & Gaes, 1997) ^a	PREP	--	--	✓	--	--	✓
Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (Cox, 2016) ^a	PIECP	--	--	✓	--	--	✓
Reentry1 and Reentry2 (Buck Willison et al., 2014) ^a	Reentry1/2	✓	--	✓	--	--	✓
STRIVE (Farabee et al., 2014)	n.a.	✓	✓	✓	--	--	--
Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (Hill et al., 2017) ^a	WCTTII	✓	--	✓	--	--	✓

Note: Recent RCTs and QEDs are listed first, followed by the expanded literature.

^aPrograms demonstrating a positive impact on at least one outcome are shaded.

* This evaluation included other (nonvocational) educational programs in its impact estimates, so we do not include this evaluation in the discussion of evaluations that isolate a single service.

Across the 30 programs reviewed in this synthesis, work readiness training and supplemental services were the most common: both were included in half (n = 15) of the programs, whereas vocational training was offered by just under half (n = 13) of the programs. Job search assistance and subsidized employment were moderately common (provided by nine and eight programs, respectively), and work release was the least common, provided by only three programs.

Although supplemental services were also common, these services varied widely across programs. RecycleForce, Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and Bridges involved case management (Barden et al., 2018; Wasserman et al., 2019). Each of these programs also included different additional services alongside case management, such as peer mentors in RecycleForce, access to mental health services in Next STEP, parenting and computer classes in Pathways2Work, and mentors and social-emotional learning in Bridges (Barden et al., 2018; Wasserman et al., 2019). Comparatively, TEP and the Milwaukee Safe Street Prisoner Release Initiative (PRI) provided cognitive-behavioral interventions (Atkin-Plunk, 2023; Cook et al., 2015). Intensive Job Assistance incorporated a job retention specialist to provide continued support upon employment (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021). EMPLOY included similar retention services, along with a public transit pass and assistance in finding interview clothing and supplies (McNeeley, 2022). Many programs

included features to supplement employment services, but programs varied in quantity and the focus area of these features.

Additionally, most programs provided multiple employment-related services, reflecting the multifaceted nature of incarcerated people’s employment needs. Integrating a variety of services provides a more comprehensive experience for participants, but this practice also introduces some challenges for research and evaluation. In impact evaluations, program participants who receive several program components are typically compared with people who have not participated in any program component. Impact findings are then attributed to the program as a whole, and researchers cannot test which services are driving the impacts. Most of the 30 programs in Table 5 fall into this category except for the nine programs that provided only one type of service (and can, therefore, attribute impacts to that service type alone) and two programs that evaluated the addition of one type of service to an existing service model. We discuss these evaluations below, organized by service type. Some evaluations included in this section used less rigorous methods (that is, not an RCT or QED), so results from these evaluations are interpreted as an association rather than a causal impact.

- **Work release.** Florida Department of Corrections Work Release (FDOC Work Release), Minnesota Department of Corrections Work Release (MnDOC Work Release), and ATCs focused on work release employment opportunities for people incarcerated in state prisons. FDOC Work Release and MnDOC Work Release were both associated with significant reductions in recidivism and increases in employment, but ATCs did not have a significant impact on employment (and did not assess recidivism impacts) (Bales et al., 2016; Duwe, 2015; Jung & LaLonde, 2019).
- **Work readiness.** About Face Online System (AFOS) and VR-JIT provided work readiness training with innovative delivery methods (LePage et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). AFOS (LePage et al., 2023) created a self-paced virtual version of the AFVP (LePage et al., 2020, 2021) hardcopy manual that is accessible through an internet browser on any internet-equipped computer. The AFOS was a guided virtual program with standardized material that could be customized to participants who were veterans. The programming included examples of job-related, transferrable, and adaptive skills; simple résumé-building guides; prompts to develop responses to typical interview questions; and acceptable explanations for work history problems or gaps in employment. Participants could tailor the programming to target the needs they felt were most important to their success. It also incorporated a feedback loop for participants and staff to communicate on assignments and tasks, including a live chat function. Despite these features, AFOS was not associated with significant employment outcomes (and did not assess earnings or recidivism).

Growing interest in technology

The reliance on digital infrastructure will likely grow as technology becomes more integrated in correctional settings and digital aptitude becomes more commonly required for employment. Although not highlighted in the current literature on employment-focused reentry programs, computerized tablets with educational or reentry planning software are being used across the correctional field as a way to encourage access to programming and increase ownership in a person’s reentry success (see Scaggs et al., 2023).

VR-JIT was particularly innovative in its use of virtual reality technology. In the RCT, participants completed mock job interviews in virtual reality via the internet using a standard computer in a prison setting rather than a more traditional (and expensive) virtual reality

head-mount system (Smith et al., 2020, 2023). One employment readiness counselor led each of the 60-minute VR-JIT sessions, and participants could progress from easy to medium to hard interviews. Program completion was individualized, with a range of three to 10 sessions to complete the training. The RCT showed that participation in the program was associated with increased employment and improvements in self-reported employment readiness outcomes: increased job interview skills, increased interview readiness, and decreased job interview anxiety (Smith et al., 2023). AFOS and VR-JIT yielded mixed evidence for the impacts of work readiness training, but both demonstrated important tests of unique program delivery methods.

- **Job search assistance.** Two evaluations were designed to isolate the impact of individual job search assistance from standard group-based work readiness classes alone. In the Intensive Job Assistance and IPS-SE evaluations, the treatment groups received access to a group-based work readiness class and individual job search assistance or a supported employment specialist (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021; LePage et al., 2020), whereas the control group received only a group-based work readiness class (the standard program). This evaluation design tests the impact of adding one service by comparing the outcomes of people who receive both work readiness and job search assistance with those who only receive work readiness. In both evaluations, the additional individualized treatment was associated with significantly greater decreases in recidivism and increases in employment compared with the standard program. These findings suggest a potential relationship between individualized, one-on-one job search assistance and increased success, as opposed to the more common group-based dynamic of work readiness classes (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021; LePage et al., 2020).
- **Vocational training.** Both UNICOR and OEP provided vocational training and education in federal prisons. OEP provided training in a variety of occupations, including business, construction, education, food service, maintenance, office support, and personal care. UNICOR also provided training but placed more emphasis on job simulation, including opportunities to work in factories producing textiles and electronics. Neither of these programs examined earnings or produced a significant impact on recidivism rates in a QED study (Tennyson et al., 2022).
- **Subsidized employment.** The National Supported Work Demonstration Project (NSWDP) provided temporary subsidized employment to people with criminal histories. Participants worked in minimum-wage jobs, typically in construction or service industries, and in small crews of eight to 10 people, which provided a more supportive and closely supervised work environment. An RCT found that the program had no impact on recidivism, demonstrating a lack of promising evidence for subsidized employment alone (Uggen, 2000).

In summary, there is limited and mixed evidence from the few studies that assessed the effects of a single employment service. Most program designs do not allow for this type of analysis. To address this major research gap, future evaluations of programs offering multiple services could work with program staff to implement study designs that would allow for isolating impacts of specific services, such as a multi-arm RCT with multiple treatment groups receiving different combinations of services or an RCT of one additional service with a control group receiving a base program (as seen in Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021; LePage et al., 2020). These evaluations would greatly benefit the field by identifying factors driving program success.

2. Focal populations and differential impacts by participant subgroups

When seeking to understand employment-focused reentry programs and their effectiveness, it is important to consider each program's focal population because this factor can affect program implementation and participant outcomes. Programs may be tailored to participant characteristics such as gender identity, age, or military service and thus focus eligibility criteria accordingly. Similarly, whether intentional or not, programs may have different impacts on different types of participants (that is, the program may work better for some participant subgroups than others). From the expanded literature, we can learn more about the wide variety of focal population characteristics and the extent to which program impacts differ by participant subgroups in the research included in this synthesis.

Program focal populations. Prior research has demonstrated the value of tailoring programming around risk, need, and responsivity (RNR) (Andrews et al., 1990; Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The foundation of RNR lies in targeting treatment and rehabilitation efforts toward a person's highest dynamic risk factors for recidivating (such as antisocial thought patterns), addressing individual needs (such as homelessness), and accounting for any responsivity factors that may impact learning and success (such as a learning disability). Risk scores are often identified through risk assessment tools and vary between agencies but typically include static questions (for example, on criminal history, educational attainment) and dynamic questions (for example, about career goals, quality of relationships) that categorize a person into low, medium, or high risk of recidivating upon release. In response to this research, recidivism risk is often a key eligibility consideration for programs involving reentering populations. Reentry programs often aim to serve high-risk participants because lower-risk people are less likely to recidivate regardless of any treatment received and may be negatively affected by higher-intensity supervision (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2013; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2002). Some employment-focused reentry programs, such as RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018), VR-JIT (Smith et al., 2023), and PRI (Cook et al., 2015), focused on serving people deemed medium to high risk. In contrast, the work release programs in Florida (Bales et al., 2016) and Minnesota (Duwe, 2015) limited participation to low-risk people.

Programs also establish inclusion criteria based on similar characteristics (for example, gender or military service) or exclusion criteria based on specific offense types, mental illness, or substance abuse. For example, ATCs (Jung & LaLonde, 2019) and INTUIT (Shivy et al., 2019) served female participants, AFVP + IPS-SE (LePage et al., 2020) and AFOS (LePage et al., 2023) served veterans, and the Department of Education's State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (RSA) served people with disabilities (Baloch & Jennings, 2018). Additionally, some programs (such as RecycleForce, Next Step, and Pathways2Work; Barden et al., 2018) excluded people convicted of a sex offense. Reasons for establishing inclusion or exclusion criteria varied. For example, AFVP + IPS-SE and AFOS included veterans following prior research during program development demonstrating the strongest evidence of support for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder receiving the services (LePage et al., 2020, 2023). Comparatively, the ATCs program included solely women due to the rapidly increasing female incarceration rates over the past 30 years and what the program developers contended is a stronger relationship between women's incarceration and children's well-being (compared with men's). Additionally, the focus on female participants was attributed to the body of prior work in employment training programs that found larger and more lasting effects on women than on their male counterparts (Jung & LaLonde, 2019).

Variations in focal population and eligibility criteria make it difficult to compare programs and draw broad conclusions about employment program impacts. Additionally, due to the limited number of rigorous

evaluations, it is difficult to make evidence-grounded claims about the focal population in relation to employment-focused reentry programs. Further research should continue to define a program's focal population and describe program participant characteristics to expand knowledge in this area, especially for characteristics that have been shown to affect the impact of a program.

Differential impacts by participant subgroups. In addition to some services being specifically directed toward certain populations, programs may be more (or less) effective for some subgroups within the larger participant population, including age, gender, education, race, recidivism risk, and offense-type groups. However, research on subgroup impacts has been limited and findings have been mixed. Reporting program impacts by subgroups remains uncommon in the literature, in part because researchers face challenges in obtaining large enough sample sizes within subgroups to identify statistically significant differences.

Age-related subgroups are the most commonly reported in the expanded literature but are still only mentioned in six studies in this review, and the effects are inconsistent. Reductions in recidivism have been observed among older program participants, as shown in the evaluations of Employment Services for Ex-Offenders (ESEO) and NSWDP, which defined older participants as those older than 27 (Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000). Similarly, the FDOC Work Release program was associated with greater reductions in recidivism for participants ages 25 to 39 than any other age group in the sample, which ranged from 15 to over 50 (Bales et al., 2016). The evaluation of the SCA Adult Demonstration FY2009 grantees found no significant impact on recidivism for participants overall and no impact specifically for participants age 30 or older (D'Amico & Kim, 2018) but showed that the program *increased* recidivism on some measures for participants younger than 30. The researchers suggest this may be attributable to the increased level of supervision program participants experienced, potentially leading to increased attention to behaviors that resulted in criminal legal system involvement. Further, the researchers also reference criminological theory (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983) suggesting that older people may be more successful in desistance following "aging out" of crime as compared to the younger participants (D'Amico & Kim, 2018). Comparatively, the impact of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CFEO) on recidivism did not vary by age (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). Regarding employment and earnings outcomes, FDOC Work Release was associated with greater impacts on employment outcomes for older participants (defined as age 50 and older; Bales et al., 2016) but did not measure earnings, whereas SCA Adult Demonstration FY2009 grantees did not show differences in employment or earnings outcomes by age (D'Amico & Kim, 2018). Thus, programs tended to have stronger positive impacts for older participants, but differential effects based on age-related subgroups warrant further study.

Evidence of differential impacts by the remaining subgroups is sparse, with only a few studies analyzing each subgroup type.

- **Gender.** Both the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP) (Cox, 2016) and FDOC Work Release (Bales et al., 2016) were associated with greater improvements in employment outcomes for female participants than for male participants, but FDOC Work Release led to greater reductions in recidivism for male participants than for female participants (Bales et al., 2016). Although PIECP showed more employment for female participants, there was no significant difference in earnings for men and women. Similarly, an evaluation of the SCA Adult Demonstration FY2009 grantees showed no differential impacts on recidivism, employment, or earnings by gender (D'Amico & Kim, 2018).

- **Education.** CFEO had no differential impacts on recidivism by educational attainment (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). However, the study only compared participants with and without high school diplomas and did not consider the impact of postsecondary education on recidivism upon release.
- **Race.** Only one study in this review analyzed differential impacts by race, finding that FDOC Work Release was associated with greater reductions in recidivism for Black and Hispanic participants compared with the other race categories (Bales et al., 2016).
- **Recidivism risk level.** CFEO (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012) yielded greater reductions in recidivism for high-risk participants compared with low-risk participants. Comparatively, an evaluation of the SCA Adult Demonstration FY2009 grantees showed no differential impacts in recidivism by risk level (D'Amico & Kim, 2018).
- **Offense type.** Intensive Job Assistance was associated with significant reductions in recidivism for participants convicted of nonviolent offenses but had no significant effect for participants with violent or more frequent offenses (Yelowitz & Bollinger, 2015). Bales et al. (2016) examined differences by specific offense type and found that FDOC Work Release was associated with greater reductions in recidivism for participants who had committed burglary offenses.

Because of the challenges in analyzing program impacts by subgroups, few studies included in this review reported such findings. Even in evaluations that tested for these, sample sizes may have been too small to detect meaningful differences in impacts. Some of these studies did find significant differences in how programs appear to impact different types of participants, which shows the importance of analyzing and reporting these results when possible. Further research on differential program impacts is essential for practitioners to identify appropriate focal populations to maximize the impacts of employment-focused reentry programs. See Appendix C for a summary of key subgroups analyzed in impact studies from the expanded literature (race, gender, age, education, risk level, and offense type).

3. Timing and continuity of services

One of the biggest sources of variation in program models among reentry programs is when service delivery begins in relation to release from incarceration. Specifically, reentry programs vary in terms of the timing of services—whether pre-release, post-release, or both, with the combination of pre- and post-release services reflecting the continuity of services. Although none of the studies explicitly tested the effects of these different models against one another, each of the three timing modalities demonstrates some evidence of success.

Pre- and post-release models. For reentry programs, including those focused on employment, a widely recognized best practice is delivering continuous services to participants pre- and post-release. However, this is difficult to achieve in practice, given the many logistical challenges to delivering services in correctional settings and the fact that facility locations (and reentering citizens' post-release residences) do not necessarily align with the location of community-based service providers. Continuous pre- and post-release services were relatively uncommon among the 30 programs. Only four of the programs incorporated continuous pre-release and post-release services for all participants: EMPLOY, Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP), PRI, and Reentry1 and Reentry2 (Reentry1/2) (McNeeley, 2022; Bellotti et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2015; Buck Willison et al., 2014). Among the SCA Adult Demonstration

FY2009 programs, continuous services were provided to about 35 percent of participants (D'Amico & Kim, 2018). EMPLOY and PRI served participants in state prisons, whereas LEAP and Reentry1/2 served participants in local jails. EMPLOY, PRI, and Reentry1/2 were all associated with reductions in recidivism, and EMPLOY and PRI were also associated with increased employment and earnings. (The evaluation of Reentry1/2 did not assess effects on employment or earnings, and LEAP did not evaluate any impacts.)

Pre-release models. Eleven of the 30 programs included in this review provided pre-release services only: ATCs, UNICOR, OEP, VR-JIT, Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (WCTTII), FDOC Work Release, MnDOC Work Release, federal correctional education programs, PIECP, Post-Release Employment Project (PREP), and RSA (Jung & LaLonde, 2019; Tennyson et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2017; Bales et al., 2016; Duwe, 2015; Davis et al., 2013; Cox, 2016; Baloch & Jennings, 2018).

VR-JIT provided work readiness training through virtual reality job interview practice in prison (Smith et al., 2023), and WCTTII incorporated both work readiness and vocational training for people confined in state prisons who were within seven years of release (Hill et al., 2017). VR-JIT was associated with improved employment outcomes. Comparatively, WCTTII did not achieve improved employment outcomes but was associated with decreased recidivism. Neither VR-JIT nor WCTTII reported earnings outcomes. Additional programs such as FDOC Work Release, MnDOC Work Release, and PIECP provided jobs during incarceration in state prisons but did not provide post-release services. FDOC and MnDOC Work Release allowed participants to work in the community while incarcerated (Bales et al., 2016; Duwe, 2015), and PIECP provided private-sector jobs paying at least a minimum wage to participants inside prisons (Cox, 2016). All three programs sought to engage people with a low risk of recidivating or those detained in lower security-level facilities and were associated with improved employment outcomes. However, FDOC and MnDOC Work Release were also associated with reduced recidivism whereas PIECP was not, and earnings data were not reported for any of these programs.

Other programs providing pre-release services have also shown promising findings in evaluations. PREP and Federal Correctional Educational Programs provided vocational training, with PREP also providing industrial work and apprenticeship opportunities (Davis et al., 2013). PREP participants demonstrated increased post-release employment, whereas Federal Correctional Educational Program participants demonstrated reduced recidivism (Davis et al., 2013), but neither program reported on earnings. RSA, which aimed to serve incarcerated people with disabilities, provided educational training, disability services training (for example, augmentative skills such as learning sign language), and job services training (which included job skills training, job readiness, and work-life skills), as well as résumé writing and interview skills pre-release. The study of RSA found that providing job services training was associated with the highest odds of employment post-release compared with the remaining services (that is, educational and disability services training) (Baloch & Jennings, 2018).

Post-release models. Programs providing only post-release services in the community were more common, with 14 of the 30 service models fitting into this category. These include Intensive Job Assistance, RecycleForce, Next STEP, Pathways2Work, INTUIT, AFVP + IPS-SE, AFOS, TEP, Bridges, CFEO, DC Central Kitchen (DCCK), ESEO, NSWDP, and STRIVE (Barden et al., 2018; Shivy et al., 2019; LePage et al., 2020; LePage et al., 2023; Atkin-Plunk, 2023; Wasserman et al., 2019). Most of these programs provided services to people who had been incarcerated in state or federal prisons; however, Intensive Job Assistance also served people returning from jails (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021), and TEP, Bridges, and

NSWDP served people in the community with any prior incarceration (Atkin-Plunk, 2023; Wasserman et al., 2019; Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000).

Among the programs examined that provided post-release services only, RecycleForce, Next STEP, and Pathways2Work implemented subsidized employment models with various additional services, including peer mentorship, vocational training, case management, and educational classes. Evaluated under an RCT, RecycleForce demonstrated a significant decrease in recidivism and a substantial increase in employment and earnings. In contrast, the Next STEP and Pathways2Work evaluations did not show a significant impact on recidivism but reported a significant increase in employment. Pathways2Work showed an increase in earnings, whereas Next STEP did not show any impact (Barden et al., 2018).

AFOS delivered online work readiness training post-release. This program, evaluated under an RCT, showed no significant impact on employment, and earnings and recidivism outcomes were not assessed (LePage et al., 2023). TEP focused on transitional employment combined with cognitive-behavioral interventions, whereas Bridges provided a comprehensive set of services, including work readiness, subsidized employment, academic enrichment, social-emotional learning, mentoring, and case management. Neither program demonstrated significant effects on recidivism or employment when evaluated through an RCT (Atkin-Plunk, 2023; Wasserman et al., 2019). TEP did not analyze earnings outcomes, and participation in Bridges had no significant impact on participants' earnings.

When considering earlier studies, CFEO and NSWDP provided subsidized employment and work readiness training post-release. The CFEO evaluation showed a significant decrease in recidivism but no significant impact on employment or earnings (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012). In contrast, NSWDP did not exhibit significant effects on recidivism, and employment and earnings outcomes were not assessed (Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000). Last, STRIVE offered vocational training, work readiness training, and job search assistance post-release; however, the program did not significantly impact recidivism or employment (Farabee et al., 2014).

Overall, these findings suggest that positive impacts are possible with all three models (continuous pre- and post-release delivery, pre-release only, and post-release only) but are more consistent in evaluations of continuous and pre-release only services. However, distinguishing the effects of service timing and continuity is not possible due to the multifaceted and diverse implementation characteristics of these programs. This research offers valuable insights into the complexities of program implementation, which should inform future efforts to evaluate and ultimately enhance program effectiveness. Additionally, future work would benefit from explicitly testing the effects of different timing models against one another to understand their relative efficacy, ideally using rigorous methods (that is, RCTs or QEDs) to effectively isolate the impact.

B. Partnerships

Partnerships are another factor to highlight as an area for future attention in program implementation and evaluation. Partnerships present an opportunity for reentry programs and correctional facilities to incorporate services that they cannot provide directly (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2021). The existing literature demonstrates that employment-focused reentry programs operated by state correctional agencies, local workforce development boards, and community organizations partner with a variety of organizations that can help participants find employment and address barriers to reentry. Many

community-based reentry programs also partner with correctional agencies to ease the transition for participants. Table 6 shows the types of organizations with which the programs included in the current review partnered, based on information available in study publications (which was limited to 10 programs).

Table 6. Partnership arrangements in programs included in the literature review

Program	Abbreviation	Local American Job Centers	Employers	Unions	Housing	Transport	Public safety
Bridges to Pathways (Wasserman et al., 2019)	Bridges	--	✓	--	--	--	✓
Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021)	n.a.	--	✓	--	--	--	--
Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release (Bellotti et al., 2018)	LEAP	✓	✓	--	✓	--	✓
Milwaukee Safe Street Prisoner Release Initiative (Cook et al., 2015)	PRI	--	✓	--	--	--	✓
Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Barden et al., 2018)	Nest STEP	--	✓	--	--	--	--
Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (Cox, 2016)	PIECP	--	✓	--	--	--	--
Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018)	Pathways2Work	--	✓	--	--	--	--
RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018; Harrod, 2019)	n.a.	--	✓	--	--	--	--
Reentry1 and Reentry2 (Buck Willison et al., 2014)	Reentry1/2	✓	--	--	--	--	✓
Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (Hill et al., 2017)	WCTTII	--	✓	--	--	--	--

The most common partnerships in employment-focused reentry programs are with employers. Programs such as Bridges (Wasserman et al., 2019), Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021), LEAP (Bellotti et al., 2018), PRI (Cook et al., 2015), Next STEP (Barden et al., 2018), PIECP (Cox, 2016), Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018), RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018; Harrod, 2019), and WCTTII (Hill et al., 2017) incorporated employer partnerships into their program models. The partnerships included employers within manufacturing, construction, landscaping, plumbing, and recycling plants. These partnerships were perceived to increase employer willingness to hire people with criminal records (Bellotti et al., 2018) by showing how developing programs can greatly benefit from expanding their employer networks.

Reentry programs with partnerships often work with multiple types of organizations. In addition to employers, Bridges partnered with justice agencies and community organizations to recruit participants (Wasserman et al., 2019); Intensive Job Assistance included services from a state human resources agency (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021); PRI worked with public safety organizations such as local law enforcement (Cook et al., 2015); WCTTII incorporated vocational training from community and technical colleges (Hill et al., 2017); and LEAP programs used partnerships with employers, jails, technical colleges, AJCs, and housing assistance (Bellotti et al., 2018). Reentry1/2 did not partner with employers but did include partnerships with public safety (such as courts and probation and parole offices) and local American Job Centers (AJCs), which can help participants find employment (Buck Willison et al., 2014).

Reentry programs used partnerships with unions, transportation services, and Medicaid less frequently, so these could be considered areas for growth.

C. Peer mentoring

Given the recent momentum of peer mentoring in reentry programming, this literature review focused on this component and its potential value in employment-focused reentry programs. The corrections and reentry field has been using peer mentoring for years (see, for example, Visher et al., 2017), but it has gained recent attention and interest (Matthews, 2021). Although peer mentorship programs still face some challenges, such as policies restricting peer mentor access to facilities due to prior felony convictions (Buck, 2014; Sells et al., 2020), harnessing the experience of peer support providers may be a promising method for scalability. That is, initial studies demonstrating the potential impact of peer mentorship with justice-involved populations suggest it may be a program component worth scaling across jurisdictions and states. Much of the literature uses the terms *peer mentoring*, *peer supports*, *peer navigators*, and *peer service providers* interchangeably. Peer mentors help current and former justice-involved people navigate their incarceration and reentry from a unique and expert perspective as they have gone through similar lived experiences and hold experiential knowledge (Matthews, 2021; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Research within other disciplines, such as health care, psychology, and education, has identified peer mentorship as an important facet of success in the respective disciplines (Dohan & Schrag, 2005; Griswold et al., 2010; Hardt et al., 2022). Although more rigorous evidence is needed, qualitative research and at least one RCT have shown that peer mentoring within different adult correctional programs can help decrease recidivism, help formerly incarcerated people overcome challenges, and promote educational retention (Bannin, 2021; Barrenger et al., 2017; Buck, 2020; Harrod, 2019; Hinde & White, 2019; Matthews, 2021; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2019; Timor et al., 2023; Sells et al., 2020). Peer mentoring during incarceration and reentry can provide returning citizens with social support that may be otherwise absent (Zwick, 2018), thereby improving the social capital of formerly incarcerated mentees (Brown-Graham et al., 2022). Similarly, justice-involved people with peer mentors may have increased interaction with prosocial supports and longer engagement in services (Harrod, 2019; Sells et al., 2006), as well as a better understanding of their criminal choices and more structured worldviews (Timor et al., 2023). Interestingly, peer mentorship can benefit both the mentor and mentee: Barrenger and colleagues (2017) found that peer specialists constructed new identities during their training and work helping others navigate reentry.

Although some broad-based reentry programs targeting substance use, holistic case management, and higher education have been shown to use peer mentoring successfully, there is limited recent empirical evidence about the use of peer support within employment-focused reentry programming. Within corrections, peer mentors are similar to case managers but bring a unique vantage point of comparable lived experience (Harrod, 2019; Reingle Gonzalez et al., 2019), which helps foster stronger relationships and trust (Matthews et al., 2020) by making people feel like they are truly being listened to (Hinde & White, 2019). The recent empirical evidence of the effectiveness of peer mentoring within employment-focused reentry programming specifically is limited to three studies:

- **Bridges** offered mentoring, case management, work readiness training, and subsidized employment to young men (ages 17 to 21) involved in the criminal legal system. Mentors with experience with the criminal legal system taught work readiness training and provided case management and emotional support. The effects of mentoring could not be isolated from the other program components for evaluation, but the authors conducted an RCT to evaluate the initial impacts of Bridges. Although the program was associated with significant reductions in arrests for felonies and violent crimes during the 12-month follow-up period, the program demonstrated no impact on overall recidivism or unsubsidized employment (Wasserman et al., 2019).
- Matthews et al. (2020) examined peer mentoring for participants in a community-based job training program, **DCCK**, through observations, interviews, and focus groups. The authors contend that the program helped the participants not only positively transform but also—through peer mentorship—build trusting relationships to overcome the challenges they encountered (Matthews et al., 2020). The study found that the training program helped participants learn cooking techniques and prompted them to reconsider their thought processes in a group setting, leading to what many called a self-empowering transformation. Interestingly, the participants noted the benefit of having a strict programmatic structure, which helped them develop a healthy routine and receive redirection by formerly incarcerated staff when they deviated from the schedule. The authors identified a common theme within the responses: finding a job is not the hardest part—it is keeping one. Participants expressed that learning how to approach challenges and obstacles in a workplace ultimately had the biggest impact on their success, alongside the connectedness and authenticity they felt from their peer supporters. However, the study did not examine the impact of peer mentoring using a comparison group.
- Harrod (2019) expanded prior work examining **RecycleForce** to further explore the effects of peer mentoring on formerly incarcerated participants receiving transitional job services through the program. The author interviewed peer mentors and transitional job employees to gauge their experience with the mentorship program. Findings indicate that having mentors with similar life experiences increased respect and trust between the mentor and mentee and particularly helped with accountability because mentors were able to correct behavior and push the mentee to work harder in a relatable yet firm manner. The interviewees reported a strong feeling of support from their mentors and from the program itself, demonstrating the importance of a strong program model and clear expectations of a peer mentorship program.

Although the evidence base for peer mentoring within employment-focused reentry programming is limited, its success in other types of programming highlights its prominence as an important implementation and research consideration for future employment-focused reentry programs.

Translating existing practices to the federal setting. Given the focus of the PROWD grant funding stream on serving people reentering from federal prisons, one of the goals of this literature synthesis was to document the existing evidence on relevant programs delivered in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. About 43,000 people return to communities from federal prisons each year compared with about 406,000 who return from state prisons (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). As evident from the studies included in the sections above, very little research on employment-related programs in federal prisons has been conducted. However, two of the programs in Table 3 focused on the federal system and were assessed by the United States Sentencing Commission: OEP and Federal Prison Industries (also known as UNICOR) (Tennyson et al., 2022). As noted above, OEP provided vocational training courses and some certifications in occupations such as business and finance, construction, food service, and office support. UNICOR provided training and jobs in factories within prisons where program participants produced clothing and textiles, office furniture, and other goods and services, primarily for U.S. government customers. The study found that, among all people confined in federal prisons who were released in 2010, there were no differences in recidivism between participants in either program and nonparticipants after controlling for factors such as criminal history, age, and gender (Tennyson et al., 2022). Neither earnings nor employment data of participants from UNICOR or OEP were examined.

Prior evidence from federal prisons also includes much earlier evaluations of correctional education programs in federal prisons (Harer, 1995; Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013) and the PREP evaluation, which included “industrial work” and vocational training (Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Davis et al., 2013). Harer (1995) found that correctional education participation was associated with reduced recidivism for people released from federal prisons, and Saylor and Gaes (1997) found that participation in PREP was associated with increased post-release employment. Although this evidence is limited and dated, results from both studies showed positive impacts on reentry outcomes.

In contrast to the wealth of literature available on various state and local correctional systems, there is a notable scarcity of research documenting the unique implementation characteristics of the federal prison system and [residential reentry centers \(RRCs\)](#)—transitional housing centers in which the majority of people exiting federal prisons are temporarily housed before their full reintegration into the community. This transitional period offers a distinct opportunity for providing hands-on job search assistance, employment counseling, job placement, financial management assistance, and the opportunity to apply skills acquired pre-release. Given the average sentence duration of approximately 12.25 years (United States Sentencing Commission, 2022) for people held in federal custody and the prevalent use of RRCs during the transition period, the federal system’s opportunity to deliver extended services and training programs may be greater compared with correctional settings with shorter lengths of stay, such as county jails.

However, the federal prison system presents its own set of challenges. Establishing local partnerships to provide continuous pre- and post-release services may pose increased challenges because federal prisons often house people far from their eventual community of return. The geographical distance between federal prisons and the communities to which incarcerated people will return can complicate local collaborations. For example, a federal case manager may be limited in their ability to connect a person to community services if the person is being released to the other side of the country, for which the case manager has limited familiarity with local organizations. In this regard, the role of RRCs becomes crucial in maintaining service continuity both before and after release. Despite these challenges, the distinctive

characteristics of federal prisons offer a platform for tailored program implementation that addresses the specific needs of this population. To date, no known research has systematically documented these vital implementation aspects within the U.S. federal prison system and RRCs. Addressing this gap in the literature is a crucial step in enhancing the effectiveness of reentry programs for people exiting federal prisons.

V. Conclusion

A comprehensive examination of research on employment-focused reentry programs published between 2018 and 2023 reveals a diverse landscape of programming characterized by different program models, delivery mechanisms, and outcomes of focus. Overall, these programs aim to support people transitioning from incarceration to the community, primarily focusing on employment as a means of reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration. This synthesis generally finds that most employment-focused programs reviewed during the course of this evidence review were associated with improved employment and earnings outcomes, but effects on recidivism were less consistent.

Of the 11 interventions evaluated in rigorous impact studies that measured employment outcomes, seven showed positive and statistically significant impacts. Most rigorous studies included in this review used a binary outcome for employment (employed versus unemployed); this is also common in the broader literature (Bunting et al., 2019). Such an approach masks the fact that not all jobs are equally good. Future research should consider including measures of job quality such as job stability, benefits, and the possibility of career advancement. Additionally, many studies included in this review measured employment through administrative data, but this paints an incomplete picture as it does not include informal employment. Given the frequency of “under-the-table work” among people with justice records, using measures that do not account for this source of income could threaten the validity of the research findings (Cox, 2016). Thus, research examining the impact of employment-focused reentry programs should consider including more nuanced measures of employment that capture job quality and the presence of work in the informal labor market, to the extent possible. Furthermore, employment success post-release can vary greatly depending on protective factors (for example, education) and risk factors (for example, mental health disorders), demonstrating the need for a more nuanced definition of employment success (Bunting et al., 2019).

Of the eight interventions evaluated in rigorous impact studies measuring earnings outcomes, five demonstrated statistically significant positive effects. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss how income remains an enduring problem among formerly incarcerated people (Cook et al., 2015). Although PRI showed a significant increase in earnings persistent throughout a one-year period, the average earnings for both the treatment and control groups were not enough to support a family above the poverty line (Cook et al., 2015). Even if participation produces higher earnings, Cox (2016) suggested that higher-paying jobs do not necessarily lead to job stability. These findings demonstrate the need for further research into multiple aspects of job quality, including job stability, earnings outcomes, and earnings relative to the cost of living.

Finally, of the 10 interventions included in rigorous studies measuring recidivism outcomes, only three demonstrated statistically significant impacts. Across the RCTs reviewed that measured recidivism, there were minimal program impacts on recidivism. Importantly, the way recidivism is defined and measured can vary greatly across studies, which can significantly alter interpretation and comparisons (King &

Elderbroom, 2014; Lai et al., 2022). For example, the time frame (such as months versus years of exposure), data sources (such as self-report or official data), and type of event (such as reincarceration or parole violation) are some variables in the operationalization of recidivism that can affect its interpretation findings. Yet still, as reflected in the findings presented in this synthesis, recidivism remains a difficult outcome to significantly affect. Even studies that showed program success in increasing either participant employment or earnings struggled to similarly affect recidivism (for example, Next STEP, Pathways2Work, PIECP). Future research should continue to capture recidivism but further attempt to measure variable impacts by subgroups and the effects of other implementation variations, such as timing (pre-, post-, or continuous) and mode (for example, individual versus group) of services.

Of note, despite a somewhat positive trend in outcomes within our findings, there is a need for more rigorous evaluations that allow for isolating the impacts of specific program components. Future research could employ multi-arm RCTs or similar designs to discern the effects of individual services within comprehensive programs, thus enhancing our understanding of what drives program success. In general, every aspect of employment-focused programming examined in this systematic literature synthesis requires further examination due to limited data available, small sample sizes, and the lack of isolation of program components. Likewise, future research should explicitly examine equity and inclusion in reentry programs and highlight targeted strategies to address disparities among different demographic groups in access and quality of services and differential impacts for specific subgroups.

As we navigate the complex landscape of reentry, future research and program development should continue to explore innovative strategies such as expanding technology in programming (for example, virtual training, online mentoring platforms, digital literacy courses), further developing external partnerships, and using peer mentorship more often to help justice-involved people reintegrate into society. Through ongoing evaluation and adaptation, we can strive to improve the prospects and well-being of those seeking to rebuild their lives after incarceration.

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Appendix A: Keywords used in the literature scan

Type	Keywords
Topic	"career" "careers" "earning*" "employ*" "hire*" "hiring" "income*" "job" "jobs" "occupation*" "occupational training" "pay" "prison to w k" "reemploy*" "re-employ*" "training" "vocational training" "unemploy*" "wage*" "w k" "w k readiness" "w k release"
Population	"convict*" "ex-convict*" "ex-offender*" "ex-prisoner*" "felon" "felons" "inmate*" "offender*" "offense" "prisoner*" "returning citizen*" "court-involved" "court-mandated" "court-dered" "incarcerat*" "jail" "jails" "prison*" "c rections" "c rectional" "community supervision" "parole*" "probation*" "pre-release" "post-release" "reentry" "re-entry" "recidivi*" "desistance" "criminal*" "criminal legal" "criminal-legal" "criminal justice" "justice involved" "justice-involved"
Outcome/ program	"assess*" "benefit*" "decreas*" "effect*" "efficac*" "empirical*" "estimat*" "evaluat*" "examin*" "experiment*" "gain*" "growth" "impact*" "improv*" "increas*" "outcome*" "progress" "random*" "RCT" "RCTs" "reduc*" "demonstration" "initiative*" "intervention*" "model*" "program*" "treatment" "implement*"

Note: Search operates with an OR within categories of search terms and an AND between the categories of search terms (for example, at least one topic term, one outcome term, and one population term are needed to retrieve a search result).

Appendix B: Variables included in abstraction form

- Citation
- Review tracking
 - Reviewer
 - Status
 - Date last edited
- Publication type
 - Describe other publication type
- Program or model
 - Was a specific or named program or service model described or evaluated?
 - Name of program or model
 - Was the approach described as new, innovative, or cutting edge?
- Service delivery setting
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both
 - Any services in state prison(s)
 - Any services in federal prison(s)
 - Any services in private prison(s)
 - Any services in jail(s)
 - Any services in residential reentry settings
 - Any services in the community
 - Urbanicity
 - Focal population
 - Eligibility criteria
- Partnerships
 - Partnerships described
 - Local American Job Centers
 - Employers
 - Unions
 - Housing
 - Transportation
 - Public safety
 - Medicaid
 - Other
 - Describe other partnership
 - Reports partnership's impact on equity
 - Describe partnership's impact on equity
 - Partnership challenges
 - Partnership recommendations
- Intervention components and types of services provided
 - Work release
 - Duration
 - Transitional jobs
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both

- Duration
 - Work readiness trainings
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both
 - Duration
 - Vocational training and education
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both
 - Duration
 - Job search assistance
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both
 - Duration
 - Subsidized employment
 - Pre-release, post-release, or both
 - Duration
 - Other employment-related components
 - Total pre-release duration
 - Total post-release duration
- Implementation information
 - Implementation challenges
 - How do these challenges vary by participant type?
 - Implementation recommendations
 - Implementation infrastructure
 - Study design
 - Was there a process evaluation?
 - Was there an outcome evaluation?
 - Was there a cost study or economic evaluation?
 - Randomized controlled trial
 - Quasi-experimental design
 - Total sample size
 - Treatment group sample size
 - Control group sample size
 - Were primary data collected?
 - Focal outcomes and findings
 - Reports recidivism outcomes
 - Recidivism definition, data source, page number
 - Impact on recidivism
 - How is employment associated with recidivism?
 - Reports employment outcomes
 - Employment definition, data source, page number
 - Impact on employment
 - Reports earnings outcomes
 - Earnings definition, data source, page number
 - Impact on earnings
 - Reports results from multiple follow-up periods
 - If multiple follow-up periods, are findings the same for all follow-up periods?

- What factors or components are associated with employment outcomes?
- What types of industries or occupations are open and friendly to people reentering the workforce after incarceration?
- What is the quality of jobs in these industries?
- Reports other outcomes associated with employment
- Specify other outcome(s) definitions, data sources, page numbers
- Impact on other outcomes
- What types and factors of employment are associated with these other outcomes?
- Disparities across subgroups in service delivery
- Disparities across subgroups in outcomes
- Additional findings
- Data limitations

Additional information

- Notes and questions
- Any potentially important information not already abstracted

Note: We developed this abstraction form as part of a larger project, so some of the variables here are not represented in this research synthesis.

Appendix C: Impact studies with subgroup findings

Program	Abbreviation	Subgroups analyzed						Summary of subgroup findings
		Race	Gender	Age	Education	Risk level	Offense type	
About Face Vocational Program Plus Individual Placement and Support—Supported Employment (LePage et al., 2020, 2021)	AFVP + IPS-SE for full program, or IPS-SE only	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
About Face Online System (LePage et al., 2023)	AFOS	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Bridges to Pathways (Wasserman et al., 2019)	Bridges	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Intensive Job Assistance (Bollinger & Yelowitz, 2021)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	--	✓	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program significantly reduced recidivism for participants deemed nonviolent, but it had no significant effect on participants deemed violent.
Next Subsidized Transitional Employment Program (Barden et al., 2018)	Next STEP	--	--	--	--	✓	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> Programs reduced recidivism the most for the highest-risk participants (pooled sample—Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce participants). ^a
Ready, Willing and Able Pathways2Work (Barden et al., 2018)	Pathways2 Work	--	--	--	--	✓	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> Programs reduced recidivism the most for the highest-risk participants (pooled sample—Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce participants). ^a
RecycleForce (Barden et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2018)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	✓	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> Programs reduced recidivism the most for the highest-risk participants (pooled sample—Next STEP, Pathways2Work, and RecycleForce participants). ^a
Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration FY2009 Grantees (D’Amico & Kim, 2018)	SCA	--	✓	✓	--	✓	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program increased recidivism rates for participants younger than age 30, with no impact on older participants. No differences by gender or risk level. <i>Employment and earnings:</i> Gender and age only (no differences).
Transitional Employment Program (Atkin-Plunk, 2023)	TEP	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.

Program	Abbreviation	Subgroups analyzed						Summary of subgroup findings
		Race	Gender	Age	Education	Risk level	Offense type	
Virtual Reality Job Interview Training (Smith et al., 2020, 2023)	VR-JIT	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Adult Transition Centers (Jung & LaLonde, 2019)	ATCs	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
EMPLOY (McNeeley, 2022)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Federal Prison Industries (Tennyson et al., 2022)	UNICOR	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
INTUIT (Shivy et al., 2019)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Occupational Education Programs (Tennyson et al., 2022)	OEP	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Center for Employment Opportunities (Newton et al., 2018; Redcross et al., 2012)	CFEO	--	--	✓	✓	✓	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program reduced recidivism the most for high-risk participants. No difference in impact for education (high school diploma versus no diploma) or age (<29 versus 29+).
Department of Education’s State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (Baloch & Jennings, 2018)	RSA	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Federal Correctional Education Programs (Harer, 1995; Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Employment Services for Ex-Offenders (Newton et al., 2018; Bierens & Carvalho, 2011)	ESEO	--	--	✓	--	--	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program decreased recidivism for older participants (ages 27+ or 36+ depending on the site) but increased it for younger participants.

Program	Abbreviation	Subgroups analyzed						Summary of subgroup findings
		Race	Gender	Age	Education	Risk level	Offense type	
Florida Department of Corrections Work Release (Bales et al., 2016)	FDOC Work Release	✓	✓	✓	--	--	✓	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program reduced recidivism the most for male participants, Hispanic or Black participants, participants ages 25–39, and participants with a burglary offense. <i>Employment:</i> The program increased employment the most for female participants and older participants (age 50+).
Milwaukee Safe Street Prisoner Release Initiative (Cook et al., 2015)	PRI	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Minnesota Department of Corrections Work Release (Duwe, 2015)	MnDOC Work Release	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
National Supported Work Demonstration Project (Newton et al., 2018; Uggen, 2000)	NSWDP	--	--	✓	--	--	--	<i>Recidivism:</i> The program reduced recidivism for older participants (age 27+) but had no effect on younger participants.
Post-Release Employment Project (Davis et al., 2013; Saylor & Gaes, 1997)	PREP	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (Cox, 2016)	PIECP	--	✓	--	--	--	--	<i>Employment:</i> The program increased employment rates more for female participants than for male participants.
Reentry1 and Reentry2 (Buck Willison et al., 2014)	Reentry1/2	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
STRIVE (Farabee et al., 2014)	n.a.	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.
Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals (Hill et al., 2017)	WCTTII	--	--	--	--	--	--	n.a.

^a This study also analyzed differential impacts on earnings and employment by age and educational attainment, but the analysis used a pooled sample of Next STEP, Pathways2Work, RecycleForce, and four other programs intended for noncustodial parents as opposed to formerly incarcerated people. We do not report these results because we cannot separate the results for our programs of interest.

n.a. = not applicable.

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