

Review of Recent Evaluation Research on Community Residential Reentry Centers

by Larry M. Fehr*

Terminology, Focus, and Prevalence

This report provides a snapshot summary of independent evaluation research findings published since the year 2000 concerning the effectiveness of “community residential reentry centers.” Please note that although the community residential reentry center language is used in the context of this summary, it is meant to include various transitional residential programs for adults leaving prison and returning to the community. In some states, the phrase “work release programs” is used for this purpose. Other states refer to “halfway houses” and “adult transition facilities.” In addition, the federal government refers to “community corrections centers” and “comprehensive sanctions centers.” A variety of other community corrections programs that do not provide a residential transitional service from prison, such as probation residential centers that are an alternative to prison, are outside the scope of this review. In addition, this review does not include various specialized treatment programs, such as those targeting only drug offenders or sex offenders.

Regardless of the name used, halfway houses are typically designed to perform the same kinds of functions. Jeremy Travis (2005, p. 241), one of the nation’s premier researchers on reentry, describes these as follows:

These facilities offer prisoners who are near the end of their sentences a structured and regulated environment as they adjust to life in the community. During the residency period, prisoners are allowed to work, visit with family members, and engage in a limited range of activities, but they must return to the halfway house each night, observing a tight curfew. Failure to follow house rules can result in return to prison or rearrest for absconding.

*Larry Fehr, M.P.A., is senior vice president of Pioneer Human Services, a Seattle-based organization that the national Re-Entry Policy Council has referred to as the largest local offender reentry program in the country. Mr. Fehr is also a lecturer in the Law, Societies and Justice Program at the University of Washington. He can be reached by email at LarryF@p-h-s.com.

In terms of prevalence, according to research conducted by the Criminal Justice Institute, there were 564 halfway houses in America in 2001 serving 22,832 prisoners. Private contractors operated the vast majority of these facilities. In fact, there were only 57 public-agency-administered facilities serving a total of 3,510 offenders in 10 states (Camp & Camp, 2003). While these numbers are significant, it is important to note that the vast majority (estimated to be over 90%) of offenders do not transition from prison through such structured residential programs but are, instead, given “gate money,” a bus ticket, and released directly

new conviction or parole violation by an offender who either had been paroled or been discharged from such a facility.”

In addition to various definitions of what is meant by recidivism, outcome measures also vary based on the length of time since discharge. It is also worth noting that a return to prison may not always be viewed as a failure. For example, if part of the function of the community transition placement is to hold the resident strictly accountable for his or her behaviors, returning a resident for a major infraction, even one that would not constitute a crime, may be justifiable as promoting public safety.

Community residential reentry centers, although underutilized in many jurisdictions, can play a critical role in promoting public safety and offender reentry success, especially during the first six months to a year, when offender risk and needs are highest.

to the community. Under these circumstances, it should not be surprising that according to the best recidivism research available, 67.5% of prisoners released will be rearrested within three years (Langan & Levin, 2002).

In contrast to the high failure rates of simply releasing prisoners to the community at the end of their term without a structured transition, the conclusion Travis reaches from the research literature on halfway houses is confirmed by others—namely, that “halfway houses have been shown [to be] effective at reducing recidivism” (Travis, 2005, p. 242).

Research Quality and the Meaning of Recidivism

It is obvious that not all evaluation research on such programs is equally rigorous from a methodological perspective. Moreover, a variety of definitions of the leading outcome measures are used. In Washington State, for example, “recidivism” is defined as “a return to a Washington State adult correctional facility as the result of a

For the purpose of this survey of research literature, if there is an indication that a study has met an acceptable scientific standard—for example, as expressed by the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods (Sherman et al., 1997)—it has been noted in the summary tables (Tables 1 and 2). Only research conducted since 2000, however, by independent researchers not employed by the agency being evaluated, has been included.

Conclusion: Treatment Is Effective

A fair reading of the research summarized in Tables 1 and 2 suggests that community residential reentry centers, although underutilized in many jurisdictions, can play a critical role in promoting public safety and offender reentry success, especially during the period of time that offender risk and needs are highest—the first six months to one year following release from prison. It is not surprising to find that the largest national effort to examine and improve offender reentry ser-

See RESEARCH, next page

vices, the national Re-Entry Policy Council, coordinated by the Council of State Governments, strongly urges policymakers to “promote use of work release programs as a transition between work inside a correctional facility and work after release into the community” (Council of State Governments, 2004). The two summary tables specifically outline:

- Three national studies, two from the United States and one from the United Kingdom, that support the efficacy of halfway houses and other reentry programs; and

- Two statewide studies of work release, one from Washington State and one from Ohio, that document program effectiveness and low rearrest rates.

Especially in light of the incorporation of the “What Works” literature in corrections, which focuses on the principles of risk, need, and responsivity (see, e.g., Andrews et al., 1998), and the growing use of validated risk-need assessment instruments, such as the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) instrument, we can conclude, as a recent review of the literature on community-based residential facilities in Canada did, that “treatment is effective” (Canadian Training Institute, 2002).

References

Andrews, D., Bonta, J., Gendreau, P., & Cullen, F. (1998). *Does Correctional Treatment Work in Public Protection Through Offender Risk Management: Putting Research into Practice*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.

Aos, S., Phipps, P., Barnoski, R., & Lieb, R. (May 2001). *The Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime, Version 4.0*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Burnett, R., & Eaton, G. (2004). *Factors Associated with Effective Practice in Approved Premises: A Literature Review*. Home Office Online Report 65/04. Available at <http://nicic.org/Library/020169>.

Camp, C., & Camp, G. (2002). *The Corrections Yearbook 2001: Adult Systems*. Middletown, CT: Crimi-

Table 1: National Literature Reviews and Cost-Benefit Analyses

Citation	Evaluation Type and Rating	Main Findings
<p>Aos, S., Phipps, P., Barnoski, R., & Lieb, R. (May 2001). <i>The Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime, Version 4.0</i>. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employs a cost-benefit analysis in describing the “bottom-line” economics of various programs that try to reduce criminal behavior, using a comparative economic approach. Examines whether a program’s benefits are likely to outweigh its costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Work release programs . . . are designed to prepare inmates to return to the community in a relatively controlled environment. Work release also allows inmates to earn income, reimburse the state for part of their confinement, build savings, and acquire more positive living habits.” • “With such a small incremental cost, if a work release program can reliably achieve even a -0.03 effect size on recidivism, then our analysis indicates that the program would roughly break even with taxpayers and would be attractive from the combined taxpayer-crime victim perspective, earning a net present value of \$2,351 per participant, equivalent to a benefit-to-cost ratio of \$6.16 of benefits per dollar of cost.”
<p>Burnett, R., & Eaton, G. (2004). <i>Factors Associated with Effective Practice in Approved Premises: A Literature Review</i>. Home Office Online Report 65/04.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review in the United Kingdom of “Approved Premises,” which provide “an enhanced level of residential supervision in the community . . . aimed at cases assessed as medium or above risk of harm of reoffending.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved Premises “are particularly well-suited to meet the dual objectives of reducing offending and increasing public protection in work with some of the most difficult, damaged and potentially dangerous offenders.”
<p>Seiter, R., & Kadela, K. (July 2003). Prisoner reentry: What works, what does not and what is promising. <i>Crime & Delinquency</i>, 49(3), 360–388.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meta-analysis of evaluation research on prisoner reentry programs and services. Utilized the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods to determine the effectiveness of various reentry programs, including halfway houses and work release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many reentry programs “are effective in aiding reentry and reducing recidivism.” • “Results indicate a positive result for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vocational training and/or work release programs (found to be effective in reducing recidivism rates as well as in improving job readiness skills for ex-offenders); - halfway house programs (found effective in reducing the frequency and severity of future crimes).”

See RESEARCH, next page

nal Justice Institute.

Canadian Training Institute (2002). *Toward an Evaluation of Community-Based Residential Facilities in Canada: A Review of the Literature*, prepared for the Correctional Service of Canada and the St. Leonard's Society of Canada. Toronto, ON: Author.

Council of State Governments (2004). *Report of the Re-entry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community*. New York: Author.

Langan, P., & Levin, D. (June 2002). *Recidivism of*

Prisoners Released in 1994. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Lowenkamp, C., & Latessa, E. (September 2002). *Evaluation of Ohio's Community-Based Correctional Facilities and Halfway House Programs*. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research.

Seiter, R., & Kadela, K. (July 2003). Prisoner reentry: What works, what does not and what is promising. *Crime & Delinquency*, 49(3), 360-388.

Sherman, L., Gottfredson, D., MacKenzie, D., Eck, J., Reuter, P., & Bushway, S. (1997). *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

Sommers, P., Mauldin, B., & Levin, S. (May 2000). *Pioneer Human Services: A Case Study*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Evans School of Public Affairs.

Travis, J. (2005). *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. ■

Table 2: Statewide Research		
Citation	Evaluation Type and Rating	Main Findings
<p>Lowenkamp, C., & Latessa, E. (September 2002). <i>Evaluation of Ohio's Community-Based Correctional Facilities and Halfway House Programs</i>. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati, Center for Criminal Justice Research.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large-scale research project (53 community-based residential programs and more than 13,000 cases) conducted by the University of Cincinnati examined data from throughout the state of Ohio, with a special focus on the degree to which the level of risk affects program effectiveness. Two-year follow-up on all offenders. Recidivism measures included any new arrest and incarceration in a state prison. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The results presented in this report provide strong support for the utilization of Halfway House and Community-Based Correctional Facility programs with moderated and high-risk offenders." • "The data in this report indicate that Halfway House and Community-Based Correctional Facility programs decrease the recidivism rates of moderate and high-risk offenders." • "The data in this report indicate, fairly consistently, that the programs have a treatment effect with moderate- and high-risk offenders. These effects are not negligible and are present in both bivariate and multivariate analyses."
<p>Sommers, P., Mauldin, B., & Levin, S. (May 2000). <i>Pioneer Human Services: A Case Study</i>. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Evans School of Public Affairs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through funding provided by the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used by researchers to evaluate programs of Pioneer Human Services (PHS). • The empirical research included data collected from state correctional and employment agencies concerning the status of former work release residents and former trainees of Pioneer, compared to a matched group of ex-felons sent to other work-release facilities in the state, following two years from discharge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Just 6.4% of the Pioneer trainees had been re-incarcerated in state prisons, compared to 15.4% of the comparison group" of felons who transitioned through other work releases in the state. (The Washington State Department of Corrections reports that of all releases from prison over a two-year period, more than 22% will recidivate.) The researchers note that, "given the population the organization focuses on, this degree of success is in fact laudable." • "The mix of training, services, and support provided by Pioneer appears to be critical to a successful transition to non-institutional life for many of the organization's clients."

REENTRY, from page 10

Action (VIA) classification of strengths. Retrieved October 11, 2003, from www.positivepsychology.org.
 Seligman, M.E.P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive Psychology. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.

Sydney, L. (2005). *Gender-Responsive Strategies for Women Offenders: Supervision of Women Defendants and Offenders in the Community*. NIC accession no. 020419. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections.

University of Cincinnati (2004). *Commission Research Projects: Maine Presentation*. Cincinnati, OH: Author.

nati, OH: Author.

Van Dieten, M. (2002). *Moving On*. Ottawa, ON: Orbis.

Van Voorhis, P. (2005). *The Women's Center: Maine Correctional Center, Maine Department of Corrections*. (Draft). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections. ■