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Research in Brief

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Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: Two NIJ-sponsored evaluations of Washington State's work release program, conducted between 1991 and 1994. The first study analyzed a cohort of 2,452 males released from Washington prisons in 1990, nearly 40 percent of whom spent a part of their sentences on work release, to describe how work release operates and how successfully inmates perform in the program. The second compared the recidivism of 218 offenders; approximately half participated in work release and half completed their sentences in prison.

Key issues: In contrast to the national decline of work release as a means of preparing imprisoned offenders for reintegration into the community, Washington has allocated more than one-third of its community corrections budget to work release. The releasees obtain daytime jobs, live in community facilities, and contribute to their room and board. Key issues explored in the studies were corrections costs, the consequences of participants committing infractions while on work release, and recidivism.

Key findings: The results of the evaluation were mostly positive:

• Nearly a quarter of all prisoners released in Washington made a successful transition to the community through work release.

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Work Release: Recidivism and Corrections Costs in Washington State

by Susan Turner, Ph.D., and Joan Petersilia, Ph.D.

Each year U.S. prisons release more than 400,000 criminal offenders to their communities. Most of those released will not remain crime free, and national statistics show that within 3 years of release, 40 percent will be returned to prison or jail.[1] Experts debate the reasons for such high recidivism rates, but all agree that the lack of adequate job training and work opportunities is a critical factor. Offenders often have few marketable skills and training and, as a result, have a difficult time securing legitimate employment. With no legitimate income, many resort to crime.

Since the early 1920s, corrections officials have attempted to remedy the problem through prison work release programs. Work release programs permit selected prisoners nearing the end of their terms to work in the community, returning to prison facilities or community residential facilities in nonworking hours. Such programs are designed to prepare inmates to return to the community in a relatively controlled environment, while they are learning how to work productively. Work release also allows inmates to earn income, reimburse the State for part of their confinement costs, build up savings for their eventual full release, and acquire more positive living habits.

During the 1970s prison work release programs expanded considerably, but they have declined in recent years. Although 43 States have existing statutes authorizing work release, only about one-third of U.S. prisons report operating such programs, and fewer than 3 percent of U.S. inmates participate in them.[2]

Despite public disenchantment with work release (see "Reasons for the Decline of Work Release"), the State of Washington has maintained its commitment to the program since initiating it in 1967. The Washington work release program permits selected inmates to serve the final 4 to 6 months of their prison sentences in privately run, community residential facilities, where they are required to be employed, submit to drug testing, and abide by curfews and numerous program rules.

It is not that Washington has been immune to the challenges faced by other States. Washington's prison population has jumped 71 percent since 1980, while the State's general population has grown just 13 percent. Citizens are frustrated with high levels of crime and violence, as is evidenced by their legislature's enactment of the Nation's first "three strikes" law—in part a reaction to a felon's committing a

Issues and Findings

continued . . .

• Less than 5 percent of the work releasees committed new crimes while on work release, 99 percent of which were less serious property offenses, such as forgery or theft.

However, with heightened supervision under strict conditions, many work releasees incurred infractions (most for rule violations and drug possession), and a quarter returned to prison. Thus, when one considers the reincarceration time spent by work release "failures," the time under correctional supervision was as long or longer for work release participants as for nonparticipants. And there were no differences in corrections costs between work releasees and inmates completing their full terms in prison.

Other findings indicated:

• Middle-aged offenders and offenders convicted of property crimes were most likely to participate in work release. Hispanic offenders were less likely to go to work release than white or black offenders.

• Fifty-six percent of the 965 work releasees in the cohort studied were termed "successful"; they incurred no program infractions or arrests. Another 13.5 percent were "moderately successful"; their infractions were not serious enough to return them to prison. Almost 30 percent were "unsuccessful"; they returned to prison.

• Older offenders were more successful than younger ones, and whites were more successful than either Hispanics or blacks. Success was also associated with having no prior criminal record.

Target audience: State and local officials and legislators, judges, and researchers and practitioners in community corrections.

rape while on parole. Observers have wondered how the program can continue to operate successfully when the emphasis is on punitive policies and politics.

This Research in Brief presents findings from two studies of Washington's work release program, conducted under a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) grant between 1991 and 1994. In sponsoring the studies, NIJ hoped that results might add to the growing body of research on intermediate sanctions and provide guidance to other States that were looking for effective and less costly corrections programs.[3]

Study 1 analyzed a cohort of all males released (n=2,452) from Washington prisons in 1990. Data pertaining to their criminal and social background and their participation and performance in work release were analyzed to describe how work release was implemented in Washington and how well inmates performed in the program. Estimated costs of work release versus prison were based on analysis not only of the cost of the program but on costs incurred if the work release participant was returned to prison for violation of program rules or for committing a crime.

Study 2 evaluated the impact of work release on recidivism and on corrections costs by comparing a sample of inmates who participated in work release with a comparable sample of inmates who completed their sentences in prison. Investigators collected information about program implementation and recidivism at 6 and 12 months following the inmates' assignment to the study.

Overall, the studies found that the program achieved its most important goal: preparing inmates for final release and facilitating their adjustment to the community. The program did not cost the State more than it would have if the releasees had remained in prison. The public safety risks were nearly nonexistent because almost no work releasee committed new crimes, and when they committed rule violations they were quickly returned to prison.

While in the program these inmates maintained employment, paid room and board, reconnected with their communities, and most remained drug free. Less than 5 percent committed new crimes while on work release, and 99 percent of those crimes were less serious property offenses, such as

Reasons for the Decline of Work Release

One reason work release programming has declined pertains to funding. Many work release programs begun in the 1970s were paid for by the Federal Government using funds from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. When Federal funding ceased, many programs were discontinued. And as the rehabilitation ideal—of which work release was very much a part—started to fade, the public embraced imprisonment as the only sure way to forestall crime. Programs that focused on rehabilitation, job training, and transitional services seemed hopelessly out of touch with the public.

Moreover, a few highly publicized and sensational failures convinced the public that early-release programs, such as work release or furlough, threatened public safety. The most extreme example was Willie Horton, the Massachusetts inmate who absconded and committed serious and violent crimes while on furlough. (Horton was actually on work furlough, not work release, but the two terms are often used interchangeably.) The case became an issue in the 1988 presidential campaign, and the negative publicity helped further erode community support for work release programs.

forgery and petty theft. Moreover, offenders who participated in work release were somewhat less likely to be rearrested, but the results were not statistically significant. One could reasonably conclude from these results that work release in Washington is a program "that works."

How Washington's work release program operates

Washington's work release program, created by legislative action in 1967, gave the State permission to allow inmates to serve sentences in the community for the purpose of work training and experience. In 1970 the first community-based program was established in Seattle under a contract agreement with Pioneer Cooperative, a private, nonprofit corporation (now Pioneer Human Services—see "A Partnership With Private Industry").

Staffing and costs. The work release program is the responsibility of the Division of Community Corrections within the State Department of Corrections (DOC). Division staff establish guidelines governing the selection of offenders for placement in work release, work with contractors to provide food and shelter in a halfway house arrangement, and supervise the correctional officers who are assigned to work release facilities.

The actual operation of the work release facilities is done on a contractual basis, with contracts renegotiated every 2 years. DOC contracts with providers for the buildings, plus the day-to-day activities, including staff, meals, shelter, inmate sign-in and sign-out procedures, urinalysis, and job checks. Contracts are negotiated on a per bed, per day basis, regardless of whether the bed is actually occupied. In 1992, at the time of the study, the average work release contract costs were between $32 and $35 per day, per bed.

DOC contracts with 15 residential work release facilities, which house more than 350 offenders (mostly adult males) on any single day throughout the State. The facilities can handle a range of approximately 15 to more than 100 residents, but most accommodate between 20 and 40 inmates. Small numbers of beds are available to female offenders and mentally ill or developmentally disabled offenders.

A Partnership With Private Industry

Washington's work release program has benefited enormously from a particularly close working partnership with private industry, particularly Pioneer Human Services (PHS). PHS has been contracting with DOC to operate work release facilities since its inception nearly 30 years ago. It now operates 4 such facilities, housing about 1,200 work releasees annually (or about one-third of all Washington's work releasees). Over the years PHS has grown to a full-service organization, providing job training at a manufacturing facility it runs, prerelease and postrelease employment in a food service business it founded, housing for offenders with special needs, and electronic monitoring of State and Federal offenders. PHS is highly regarded nationally and in the State and was recognized by former President Bush in 1992 as one of the Nation's "Points of Light."

In the 1991–1993 biennium, approximately $115 million of the $312-million DOC budget was allocated to community corrections. About 38 percent (or $43 million) of the community corrections budget was for work release.[4] These funds pay primarily for DOC staff to administer the statewide program and monitor participants at the work release centers.

Admission criteria and process. Washington's work release program is governed by the stipulations set forth in the Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) of 1981, which significantly altered the State's criminal sentencing practices as well as the guidelines for work release. The SRA stipulates that an inmate may not enter work release sooner than 6 months prior to discharge. The exact time depends on the length of the offender's original sentence. Inmates generally apply for work release within 12 to 17 months prior to their release date. The application is screened by the correctional counselor, the unit supervisor, and finally by the current DOC facility superintendent.[5]

Inmates can apply for work release only if:

- They have a minimum security status.
- They have less than 2 years to serve on their minimum term, including anticipated good time credits.
- They have not been convicted of rape in the first degree or, if so, are beyond the first 3 years of confinement.
- They have not been convicted of murder in the first degree or, if so, have the written approval of the Secretary of Corrections.

Inmates who meet these initial screening criteria may be subsequently denied work release by DOC if (1) they have exhibited assaultive behavior while in prison, (2) the offender's victim resides in the area, (3) the offender has made threats to the victim during incarceration, or (4) the offender has two or more prior work release failures during the current commitment.

Once DOC judges an offender eligible for work release, the work release facilities' Community Screening Board, consisting of work release staff and local citizens, must agree to accept the inmate for admission to their local work release center. In most cases the Community Screening Board accepts DOC's recommendations.

Daily operations. After being accepted for a particular residential facility, inmates receive a set of standard rules. These rules specify that they are to abide by their work plan, remain in the work release facility at all times except those approved for work and other appointments, remain alcohol and drug free, be employed or have resources in order to meet financial needs, report all earnings to DOC community corrections officers (CCOs), and obey all Federal, State, and local laws.

Offenders must obtain gainful employment or training and must pay about $10 a day for room and board. Participants are ultimately responsible for finding work in the community, although CCOs and staff provide referrals. Residents also pay support to their families and court-ordered restitution. The average length of stay in the work release facility is about 4 months but varies according to the length of the original court-imposed sentence.

The CCOs work at the work release facilities a minimum of 8 hours a day. Their primary role is to provide case management services, which includes providing informal advice and conducting intake interviews. For example, they review each client's progress as well as discuss personal problems, such as substance abuse. CCOs can require offenders to participate in special treatment or may initiate procedures for sending them back to prison. Residents fill out "Offender Schedule Plans" listing place of employment, immediate supervisor, and rate of pay; CCOs check with employers to verify these facts.

Study 1: A statewide analysis of work release

Study 1 was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of prisoners placed on work release? How have these characteristics differed from those of the general prison population?
- How many offenders placed on work release have successfully completed their programs? Why have some not succeeded?
- What characteristics distinguish those who have been successful from those who have been unsuccessful on work release?
- What are the costs associated with a prison term that includes a work release sentence compared to those of a prison sentence without work release?

The data for study 1 were supplied by DOC research staff. They identified all male inmates released from prison (to the streets) during calendar year 1990.[6] For each of the 2,452 offenders in this cohort, background and criminal record information was obtained from DOC's computerized Offender-Based Tracking System (OBTS). OBTS lists the inmate's age, race, prior criminal record, most serious conviction, sentence length imposed, and date admitted and discharged from DOC. It also records transfers to jail, prerelease, and work release and work release application and performance information. To this information was added more detailed data from DOC files on the exact reason for return (e.g., new crime, drug possession) for work releasees who had been returned to custody.

Study 1 findings

The data reveal that almost half (48.8 percent) of the inmates in the 1990 release cohort applied for work release during their prison term, and 39.4 percent were placed in work release facilities at some point during their sentence.

An average of 7.1 months elapsed between the time an inmate was admitted to prison and when he applied for work release. Once the application was submitted, it took just over 3 weeks before a decision was made to accept or reject him for the program. After an additional 56 days, the inmate actually entered a work release facility; this time was used to prepare the inmate for work release and to locate a suitable and available residential placement. These inmates served an average sentence of 15 months. With an average application process of 10 months, the inmates spent approximately 5 months in work release.

Participant characteristics. One would expect work release participants to differ from the general prison popula-

tion since the law and DOC policies indicate that only certain offenses and offenders (generally the less serious) are eligible. After meeting these legal standards, inmates are free to decide if they want to apply for work release. Incentives to participate include the opportunity to live in the community, be closer to family and friends, and obtain some practical work experience. But some inmates do not plan to be released to a location where a work facility exists, and some inmates judge the requirements and closer supervision of work release too bothersome. They choose instead to serve out their full terms in prison.

Several background characteristics distinguished inmates who did not choose work release from those who did:

- Younger and older inmates were *less* likely than middle-aged inmates to go to work release.
- Hispanics were *less* likely to go to work release than either whites or blacks.
- Inmates with no prior criminal record were *less* likely to go to work release.
- Inmates convicted of property offenses (burglary, theft, and forgery) were the *most* likely to go to work release.

At least one of these differences may reflect the screening procedures for work releases. For example, policies deny work release to offenders convicted of certain violent offenses—hence their lower representation in the work release sample. There could be another explanation for the finding that inmates with no prior criminal records were less likely to participate in work release. These lower risk inmates had other program options for decreasing their prison length of stay (such as a "work ethic" camp for nonviolent offenders).

Although Hispanics were disproportionately underrepresented in the work release cohort, this did not appear to result from their having fewer of the characteristics that would have made them eligible. In fact, Hispanics were overrepresented as drug offenders—which indicates their representation among work releasees should have been much higher than observed. DOC staff suggested one reason for fewer-than-expected Hispanics is that some may have had Immigration and Naturalization Service detainers, making them ineligible for work release.

Who was successful? Each inmate was classified according to performance:

- *Successful* inmates were those who completed work release without any type of rule infraction or new crimes having been noted in their official corrections record and who returned directly into the community from the work release facility.
- *Moderately successful* inmates were those who had committed an infraction but one not judged serious enough to remove them permanently from work release.
- *Unsuccessful* inmates committed some type of infraction, either a rule violation or new criminal conduct, and were returned to prison to serve out the remainder of their term.

Of the 965 work releasees in the cohort, 544 (or 56 percent of participants) were judged successful in work release. If one considers that nearly 40 percent of the original cohort were placed on work release to begin with, and that about two-thirds succeeded, it is clear that almost one out of four inmates in Washington made a successful transition to the community through work release.

An additional 131 inmates (or 13.5 percent of participants) were moderately successful, and 290 inmates (or 30 percent of participants) were judged unsuccessful in work release and were returned to prison to complete their terms.

The most frequent reasons for return to prison from work release were failure to abide by curfews or absconding from the program, drug possession, and other program rule infractions (see exhibit 1). New crimes or law violations accounted for a very small percentage (3.6 percent) of those returned. In fact, in the entire cohort of 965 work releasees studied, records indicate that no offender committed a violent felony while in the program: the few crimes committed were thefts and forgeries. These findings suggest that Washington's work release program poses very little risk to the surrounding community.

Predicting success. Variables indicating race, education level, occupation before imprisonment, marital status, employment status at arrest, previous work stability, conviction offense type, prior criminal record, substance abuse dependency, and length of current sentence were each cross-tabulated with the three success-level variables, revealing that:

- Older offenders were more successful at work release than younger offenders.
- Whites were more successful than Hispanics and blacks. More than 40 percent of Hispanic and black work

releasees were returned to prison compared with 25 percent of white offenders.

• Offenders with no prior criminal record were more successful than those with a prior record. Almost two-thirds of inmates with no prior record were successful compared with fewer than half the offenders with a prior conviction.

• Offenders convicted of person crimes (e.g., robbery and assault) were more successful than offenders convicted of property or drug crimes.[7]

Comparing work release costs with prison costs. A recent survey of prison administrators reported that, while they recognized the rehabilitative potential of work release, they were most interested in using work release to reduce prison crowding and associated costs.[8] Community-based facilities are much less expensive to operate than prisons, and so allowing inmates to serve the last several months of their prison sentence in the community can reduce corrections costs. According to national estimates, for example, work release costs about $34 a day, and prison costs $54 a day (operational costs only).[9] In addition, inmates who work can be required to help pay for their room and board, support their families, and pay taxes.

Unfortunately, the cost savings accrued through work release and other community-based programs have not been as substantial as proponents had hoped. For example, Minnesota recently implemented an Intensive Supervision Program designed to release prisoners early from prison on the condition that they participate in an enhanced community supervision program. Fewer offenders than expected actually participated in early release, reducing the potential for large cost savings. Similar results have been seen in New Jersey, Florida, Arizona, Texas, and Oregon.[10]

It is therefore clear that community-based sanctions are not necessarily less expensive than prison. It all depends on how offenders behave in the program and how program administrators choose to punish infractions (particularly drug use). If infractions and rule violations are punished with incarceration, initial cost savings are reduced or eliminated as a result of the additional dollars required to incarcerate program failures. In effect, close surveillance may end up generating many program failures who are eventually returned to prison. In that case, the State incurs the cost of their work release program in addition to eventual reuse of a prison cell. The community-based sanction may actually end up costing more than a single term of incarceration uninterrupted by work release. Previous work release evaluations have not provided a complete accounting of total costs, which at a minimum must include the cost of rehousing unsuccessful work release offenders in jail or prison.

For each of the 2,452 inmates in the work release cohort, files on their movements since coming to prison were available. The data made it possible to record how much time each inmate spent in work release and nonwork release institutions as well as in local jails.

DOC then provided statewide estimates of the daily cost of different sanctions; by combining this information, researchers were able to calculate the average cost of a prison sentence that included work release and one that did not (see exhibit 2).

When all incarceration time served is taken into account, inmates who participated in work release served, on average, about 4 months less time in a prison or prerelease facility than inmates who did not participate. However, for every 3 days in work release, offenders spend about 1 day back in an institution—either prison or a prerelease center.

Exhibit 2 suggests that inmates who participated in work release cost the State

Exhibit 1: ***Most Serious Infraction for "Unsuccessful" Work Release Participants***

Reason for Return	Percent of 290 Offenders
Law Violation	**3.6**
Forgery	0.7
Theft	1.4
Other, unspecified	1.5
Medical Condition	**3.6**
Drug Possession	**34.9**
Program Rule Violation	**57.8**
Alcohol possession	12.2
Escape/curfew	20.1
Fighting	3.2
Failure to work	4.3
Failure to report income	2.5
Miscellaneous	15.5

about $4,000 less than inmates who did not. However, the cost comparison does not account for crime and background differences between work releasees and nonwork releasees, which have already been shown to be considerable. It is known that nonwork releasees were, on average, convicted of more serious crimes. As such, one would expect that they would serve longer prison terms and cost the State more as a result. To make credible cost comparisons among sanctions, one must compare offenders who are similar in background characteristics and conviction crimes. Study 2 was designed to do exactly that.

Study 2: The impact of work release on recidivism and on corrections costs

This evaluation of the effects of work release was designed as an experiment in which eligible offenders were to be randomly assigned to participate or not to participate in work release. In a randomized experiment, one has more confidence that any observed differences result from participating in work release rather than from preexisting background differences.

The experiment was conducted in Seattle, which is Washington's largest city and home to more than 50 percent of the work release offenders. The study had the full cooperation of the Washington DOC, the DOC Community Corrections Division, and the various managers of the six individual work release facilities serving males in Seattle.

Identifying the sample. The study required a fairly large sample size in order to detect the relatively small outcome differences that were expected between experimental and control offenders. Based on prior evaluations, it was estimated that the work release effects (e.g., recidivism reduction) would not be large, with perhaps 10- to 20-percent differences between experimental and controls. Procedures were devised that would yield expected sample sizes of several hundred offenders during the time frame of the study.

Exhibit 2: ***Costs of Prison Sentence That Includes Work Release vs. Prison Without Work Release***

Program Type		Prison Without Work Release		Prison With Work Release	
	Daily Cost	Average Number of Days	Cost	Average Number of Days	Cost
Before Work Release					
Prison	$68.60	440	$30,185	240	$16,464
Prerelease	$50.36	11	$ 554	48	$ 2,417
Jail	$51.00	1	$ 51	0	0
After Work Release					
Prison	$68.60	—	—	25	$ 1,715
Prerelease	$50.36	—	—	11	$ 554
Work release	$48.07	—	—	104	$ 4,999
Jail	$51.00	—	—	5	$ 255
Total Costs			**$30,790**		**$26,404**

Note: Prison, prerelease, and work release costs are averages of 1991–1992 and 1992–1993 costs. For jail costs, $51/day is the figure that would be charged to an outside contractor for a jail bed in King County, Washington (the largest county). Work release costs reflect "recovery" costs of inmates' room and board payments.

Offenders who were deemed eligible for work release by DOC were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (who progressed toward work release using normal procedures) or the control group (who were removed from the work release eligibility list and remained in prison to complete their full prison terms).

To avoid seriously disrupting the flow of inmates into Seattle work release facilities, investigators assigned 1 out of every 10 eligible inmates to the control group and 1 to the experimental group. The remaining 8 eligible offenders did not participate in the study but instead maintained their status on the waiting list and were handled according to normal DOC operating procedures. Based on analysis of available DOC data, these procedures were estimated to yield approximately 200 study offenders a year.

However, the flow of offenders entering the DOC pool of work release "eligibles" was too slow to permit reaching an adequate sample size during the study's assignment period. A year after the random assignment procedures were put in place, only 125 offenders had been assigned to the study. It is unclear why the inmate flow did not meet expectations, but DOC officials suggest it resulted from fewer applications to the program (not from rejecting more applicants).

To increase the study's sample size, researchers supplemented the randomized assignment with offenders who during the study period had been part of the 8 out of every 10 offenders who were not included in the initial randomized assignment procedures. Forty-eight offenders were randomly selected from this initial pool of work release eligibles and placed in the ex-

perimental study group. In addition, DOC identified 45 additional control offenders who for reasons unrelated to eligibility criteria had not actually participated in work release prior to their release from prison, primarily because they had "maxed out" on their sentences before all the administrative procedures had been completed or work release beds had become available. These offenders were used to supplement the control group. Thus, the final sample totaled 218 offenders, of whom 125 had been randomly assigned to the study and an additional 93 had been chosen as a matched comparison group.[11]

Data collection. For each of the 218 study participants, a number of data collection forms were completed by the researchers' onsite staff. The background review captured information about the inmate's demographics (e.g., age, race, education, marital status), prior employment history, drug use information, current offense information, and prior criminal history.

At 6 months and again at 12 months after assignment, a series of other forms were completed that recorded such information as time spent in different institutions and work release centers, contacts made and services received, and the number of days on postdischarge status. Finally, recidivism information was obtained for each offender based on State-level criminal history "rap sheets." The date, nature of arrest, disposition, and sentence were recorded for each offense occurring during the 1-year followup period after study assignment.

Characteristics of the Seattle sample

The Seattle sample closely resembled the statewide sample, which was to be expected since about one-third of Washington's DOC population comes from the Seattle area. As shown in exhibit 3, the study work release offenders averaged about 30 years of age. About half of the offenders in the sample were white, and 43 percent were black. More than half of the sample were convicted of drug offenses, and 84 percent were classified as dependent on alcohol, with almost three-quarters dependent on cocaine. About two-thirds of the offenders in the sample had never worked or had worked only occasionally (6.2 percent and almost 60 percent, respectively).

One can see that the characteristics of work release participants were not significantly different from those of nonwork release participants, except in three instances: number of prior arrests, occupational history, and type of current offense. This suggests that the randomization and matching strategy used was successful in that it was desired that the two groups be similar in background characteristics so that any observed differences in recidivism could be attributed to participation in work release.[12]

Work release program activities

The investigators sought to learn what actually transpired when offenders were placed in work release. What kinds of jobs did they get, and what types of monitoring activities were imposed? How well did inmates perform, and how long did they stay in the program? To answer those questions, the work release offenders were "followed" into their individual site placements, and information was coded about the kinds of jobs they obtained, how much money they earned, the number of times they were seen by CCOs, how often they were tested for drugs, and the kinds of rehabilitation programs they participated in.

As expected, most of the program's focus was on obtaining a job. In fact, if offenders did not have a job within the first few weeks, they might be returned to the institution. Generally, offenders had one or two jobs during their 3- to 4-month work release stay. Many more interviews were attempted with employers than were actually completed. The analysis of offenders' first jobs showed that most were either in the restaurant or construction industries, with a median pay of $8 an hour. More than half of the offenders were still working at their first jobs when they left work release (discharged from DOC or placed on postrelease supervision) or when the review of their files was completed.

Work releasees were tested for drugs at the work release facility an average of once a month. The tests revealed very low percentages of drug use. Only 8 percent of work release participants tested positive for drugs, usually for cocaine. On average, work releasees participated in outpatient drug and alcohol counseling sessions (usually Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings) about once every 2 months. In addition, they had face-to-face meetings with their CCO about once a week.

Recidivism outcomes during 12-month followup

It is generally believed that recidivism rates are the key factor in determining the effectiveness of work release. This study included a 1-year followup period, which began at the point of random assignment. Work releasees were not immediately placed in the community following random assignment,

Exhibit 3: ***Characteristics of Control vs. Experimental Work Release Sample***

	Control (N=106) (Percent)	Experimental (N=112) (Percent)
Average Age (years)	31.4	30.4
Race		
White	63.2	49.6
Black	30.2	43.2
Hispanic	3.8	1.8
Other	2.8	5.4
Education[a]		
High school	45.9	48.4
High school graduate	39.3	48.4
Posthigh school graduate	13.1	3.1
Occupation[a]		
Clerical/sales/teacher	4.6	4.7
Service	13.1	14.1
Skilled labor	26.2	25.0
Semiskilled	13.1	17.2
Unskilled	19.7	31.2
Marital Status[a]		
Single	62.3	67.2
Married	18.0	6.2
Divorced/separated	16.4	23.4
Employed at Time of Arrest[a]		
Yes	34.4	25.0
Work Stability[a,b]		
Never worked	16.4[b]	6.2
Occasionally	36.1	59.4
About half the time	4.9	10.9
Worked most of the time	16.4	9.4
Continuous employment	21.3	9.4
Unknown	4.9	4.0
Most Serious Current Offense[b]		
Homicide	2.9	3.6
Rape/sex	16.2	1.8
Robbery	5.7	12.6
Assault	7.6	8.1
Burglary	24.8	15.3
Theft	11.4	8.1
Drugs	31.4	50.4
Other	0.0	0.0
Average Sentence Length	(months) 25.5	(months) 18.0
Average Number of	(number)	(number)
Prior arrests[b]	7.2	4.5
Prior felony convictions	2.8	2.4
Prior miscellaneous convictions	2.9	2.1
Prior jail terms	2.3	2.1
Prior prison terms	0.9	0.5
Prior adult person criminal convictions	0.3	0.3
Prior adult drug convictions	0.5	0.5
Prior adult property convictions	1.7	1.4
Prior adult other convictions	1.0	1.0
Dependency on[a]		
Alcohol	78.7	84.4
Marijuana	62.3	70.3
LSD	3.3	7.8
Amphetamines	1.6	1.6
Cocaine	59.0	73.4
Crack	29.5	28.1
Heroin	16.4	12.5
Participated in Drug Treatment[a]		
Yes	67.2	68.8

[a] Indicates data were available for randomly assigned subjects only.
[b] Indicates controls and experimentals were significantly different at p<.05. Chi-square tests were used for categorical variables; t-tests were used for continuous variables.

since several weeks often passed between approval for the program and actual transfer to the work release facility. Thus, the 12-month followup included an average of 2 months initial time in an institution, followed by an average of 10 months in the community for work release study offenders. During the followup period, control offenders were "on the street" an average of just under 7 months after being released from prison.

Investigators obtained each offender's State rap sheet and recorded all arrests (felony and misdemeanor), convictions, and incarcerations occurring during the followup period. Information on infractions during work release and prison was obtained from the DOC OBTS computer and work release folders. Events that occurred while the offender was in prison or on work release were separated from events that occurred afterward (including postdischarge).

The results (see exhibit 4) show significant differences. Infractions (mostly rule violations and drug possession and use) were recorded for 58 percent of work releasees but for only 4.7 percent of nonwork releasees. As a result, about a quarter of all work releasees were returned to prison, compared to 1 percent of nonwork releasees. However, when looking at infractions while offenders were in an institution, one finds that nonwork releasees incurred significantly more infractions during their time in prison. When one adds together infractions during work release and while in prison (in analyses not reported in exhibit 4), work release offenders were twice as likely to incur a violation when compared to nonwork releasees (67.3 percent versus 33.6 percent).

In terms of new crimes, although work releasees were less likely to be arrested

during the followup period, the difference was not statistically significant. As in study 1, a very small percentage of work releasees were arrested for new crimes while on work release (less than 3 percent). By the end of the 1-year followup period, which included an average of about 3 months after discharge from DOC, 30 percent of nonwork releasees (controls) had been arrested, compared to 22 percent of work releasees (experimentals). As a result, about 4 percent of both groups were returned to prison for a new crime during the year.

Overall, if one combines all the returns to prison (for either a rule infraction or new crime), one finds that 29.5 percent of work releasees were returned to prison during the 1-year followup, compared to 5.7 percent for nonwork release participants.

The returns to prison were mostly for short stays, however. By the end of the 1-year followup period, 71.4 percent of control offenders and 52.7 percent of experimental offenders had been discharged. Nine percent of work release participants were institutionalized, contrasted with 2.9 percent of controls, a marginally significant difference. These differences suggest that the length of time under correctional supervision may actually have been longer for those participating in work release.

Exhibit 4: ***Recidivism During 1-Year Followup for Study 2 Participants***

	Control (N=106) (Percent)	Experimental (N=112) (Percent)
In-Prison Infractions		
Any infraction	29.8*	11.8
Assault/sex crime	5.8*	0.9
Weapon possession	1.0	0.0
Possession of drugs, alcohol	3.8	3.6
Rules	17.3*	5.4
Work Release Infractions		
Any infraction	4.7*	58.0
Assault/sex crimes	0.0	0.0
Weapon possession	0.0	0.0
Possession of drugs, alcohol	1.0*	18.8
Escape	0.0	8.9
Rules	2.8*	42.3
Sanctions for Infractions		
Jail pending a hearing	1.0	1.8
Returned to prison	1.0*	25.9
Arrests During Work Release		
Any arrest	0.0	2.7
Homicide/rape	0.0	0.0
Assault	0.0	0.0
Robbery	0.0	0.9
Theft	0.0	0.9
Drugs	0.0	0.9
Arrests After Release		
Any arrest	30.2	22.3
Homicide/rape	0.0	0.0
Assault	8.5	2.7
Robbery	0.9	1.8
Burglary	3.8	2.7
Theft	3.8	7.1
Drugs	7.6	8.9
Sanctions for Arrests		
Any conviction	7.6	7.1
Any jail	0.0*	3.4
Any prison	4.7	3.6

* Indicates control and experimental groups were significantly different at p<.05 using chi-square tests.

Costs of work release versus prison

Is work release less expensive than serving a complete term in prison? To answer this question, one must determine the relevant period of time for which costs are to be estimated. Since about 26 percent of work releasees were returned to prison as a result of a work release infraction, the costs of rehousing them in prison needed to be considered in the overall cost calculation.

If one considers only costs before the inmates either leave prison or work release for the first time, one ignores "reprocessing" for offenders who are returned to prison from work release facilities or the community. However, if one wants to include costs following first release, one must make some decision about how far in the future to extend the window for analysis. Not all the study offenders were discharged during the study time period; thus, one cannot estimate costs for the entire sentence served in the institution plus time in the community before discharge for all offenders. The analysis reflects the costs associated

with completed sentences for 70 percent of controls and 50 percent of experimentals.

Washington corrections officials furnished the daily cost of each of the correctional programs, making it possible to compute the total costs of supervising each inmate during the initial sentence and the followup period. By averaging these cost estimates across inmates in the control and experimental groups, one can compare the costs of a prison term that includes work release to one that does not.

The analysis (see exhibit 5) shows basically no difference in costs between work releasees and inmates completing their full terms in prison. If one considers the costs associated with work release from the time an inmate was admitted to prison until his discharge, the estimated cost would average $25,883 per inmate. This is in contrast to the estimated $25,494 it would have cost per inmate, on average, to serve out his time in prison.

The two studies thus produced similar findings regarding the costs of work release. Other findings related to success, failure, and recidivism lead to several conclusions.

Who is successful on work release?

Although work release might not reduce the overall recidivism rates of participants, there may be subgroups for whom the program could produce more successful outcomes. Similar to the analysis in study 1, an attempt was made to identify factors that were related to three recidivism outcomes: any infraction during work release; any arrest during the 1-year followup; and any return to prison (as a result of infraction or arrest) during the 1-year followup. A number of background characteristics of offenders were considered, such as age, race, education, prior employment, drug involvement, and current offense.

It was not possible to find characteristics of offenders, or a profile of an offender, who appeared to do better on work release than in prison. However, a few characteristics were related to success, regardless of condition. For example, offenders with a prior history of cocaine or crack dependence were more likely to have committed an infraction than others; those whose most serious current offense was for a theft charge were more likely to be rearrested; and white offenders were less likely than others to commit an infraction.

Exhibit 5: ***Study 2 Work Release vs. Prison Costs, for Initial Sentence and 1 Year After Assignment to Study***

	Daily Cost	Control		Experimental	
		Average Number of Days	Cost	Average Number of Days	Cost
Before First Release to Community					
Prison	$68.60	290	$19,894	240	$16,464
Prerelease	$50.36	95	$ 4,784	48	$ 2,417
Work release	$48.07	6	$ 288	88	$ 4,230
After Release (i.e., reprocessing cost)					
Prison	$68.60	3	$ 206	29	$ 1,989
Prerelease	$50.36	2	$ 101	7	$ 353
Work release	$48.07	1	$ 48	5	$ 240
Community custody inmate	$ 2.03	55	$ 112	80	$ 162
Postrelease supervision	$ 2.03	30	$ 61	14	$ 28
Discharge	0	108	0	80	0
Totals		**592**	**$25,494**	**592**	**$25,883**

Note: For controls, "after release" refers to the followup time after an offender first leaves his initial prison term and returns "to the street." For experimentals, "after release" refers to the followup time after an offender first leaves his first placement in a work release facility and returns either "to the street" or back to an institution.

Summary and conclusions

Washington's work release program has been successful on several fronts: nearly a quarter of *all* prisoners released in Washington under current statutes made a successful transition to the community through work release. While in the program, these inmates maintained employment, reconnected with their local communities, paid for their room and board, and most remained drug free. Given that in most States fewer than 5 percent of prisoners even participate in work release, this is quite an accomplishment.

However, the work release program did not reduce offender recidivism rates or corrections costs. Critics of community corrections often argue that such programs should deliver all of the above services while showing a reduction in recidivism and costs. Such ex-

pectations are unrealistic. Prison programs should not assume the goals and functions of other social institutions such as schools and welfare agencies.[13]

Realistic measures of corrections programs' effectiveness should account for daily activities and the constraints under which the programs operate. Realism, however, does not mean easy to achieve. Most participants in Washington's work release program had lengthy criminal histories, serious substance abuse problems, and possessed limited education and job skills. Yet, when supervised in this work release program, they found jobs, paid rent, and refrained from crime.

Although most corrections evaluations adopt recidivism as their primary outcome measure, few corrections officials believe that what they do chiefly determines recidivism rates. As John J. DiIulio, Jr., recently wrote: "Most justice practitioners understand that they can rarely do for their clients what parents, teachers, friends, neighbors, clergy...or economic opportunities may have failed to do."[14] Adopting more realistic outcome measures may make it more possible to bridge the wide gap between public expectations for the justice system and what most practitioners recognize as the system's actual capability to control crime. By documenting what corrections programs *can* accomplish, we can move toward integrating programs like work release into a more balanced corrections strategy. Such a strategy would successfully return low-risk inmates to the community, thereby making room to incarcerate the truly violent offenders.

Notes

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1992*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995, Table 5.12a.

2. Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1990:1.

3. The few previous studies of work release had shown some positive results—mostly on employment rather than recidivism. These studies relied primarily on quasi-experimental methods that failed to control adequately for preexisting differences between study groups. Thus, one could not determine whether outcome differences were due to the effect of the intervention (work release) or to characteristics on which work release and comparison groups differed.

4. The work release budget includes the institution's phase referred to as "prerelease," in which inmates prepare for their placement in the community work release facilities, as well as actual placement in the community work release site.

5. The offender can also change his mind about participating in work release during the application process. Of those who were denied work release in 1989 by DOC, 30 percent were offenders being held on detainers, 17 percent were offenders with disciplinary problems, 9 percent had escape infractions, and 17 percent refused to participate in work release.

6. Only male inmates who were sentenced and released under the Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) of 1981 were included in the sample. DOC estimates that about 80 percent of offenders released in 1990 were SRA offenders and 90 percent were male.

7. The recidivism predictors are nearly identical to those identified in a national sample of released prisoners (Beck, Allen, and Bernard Shipley, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989).

8. Simon, Senator Paul, "Wardens Call for Smarter Sentencing, Alternatives to Incarceration, and Prevention Programs," U.S. Senate Press Release, Washington D.C., December 21, 1994.

9. Maguire, Kathleen, and Ann L. Pastore, eds., *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1993*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994.

10. Clear, Todd, and Anthony Braga, "Community Corrections," in *Crime*, eds. James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia, San Francisco, California: ICS Press, 1995.

11. Comparison of random versus nonrandom cases on a number of background characteristics, including age, race, current offense, length of prison term, multiple measures of prior criminal record, and legal financial obligations revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups on any measure except the number of prior arrests and the number of prior parole revocations. Of these characteristics, nonrandom offenders had fewer prior arrests and fewer prior parole revocations than randomly assigned offenders.

With any random-assignment protocol, the possibility exists that the actual placement may be inconsistent with the designated assignment. In the current study, several factors affected actual placement after assignment.

Although experimental offenders were to be placed in work release facilities soon after the assignment call was made to the researchers, in some instances offenders reached the end of their terms before placement. The potential for changing control offender assignments was more often related to offender dissatisfaction with remaining in prison rather than with being placed in work release. Although potential challenges to control assignments were anticipated by RAND Corporation and DOC staff and measures were taken to deal with them (i.e., reminding offenders that work release is a privilege and not a right), a few control offenders were placed in work release when it appeared their needs outweighed the study assignment. When one examines the actual placements versus those assigned for the entire study sample, 91 percent of controls remained in prison; 86 members of the control group were placed in work release.

The study's main analysis of outcomes considers cases as assigned, not as actually placed (thus one sees infractions during work release for a smaller percentage of control offenders). Although this procedure results in diluted estimates of treatment effects, it is the recommended strategy to ensure unbiased estimates of program impact. See Garner, Joel H., and Christy A. Visher, "Policy Experiments Come of Age," *NIJ Reports*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, September/October 1988.

12. Of the 25 characteristics on which experimental and control offenders were compared (see exhibit 3), one would expect at least one comparison to be significant by chance. Nonetheless, the three significant differences found indicated that work releasees might have been slightly less serious offenders than their control group counterparts. To the extent these characteristics are related to recidivism, one would tend to find more positive outcomes for the work releasees. However, the study found that work releasees were actually *more* likely to commit infractions. To address the concern of differences in background characteristics on the "any arrest" outcome, a multiple logistic regression analysis was conducted in which "any arrest" was regressed on controls versus experimentals, age, race, high school graduate, employed prior to prison, dependence on cocaine or crack, whether postrelease supervision had been ordered, whether the inmate was referred to the study from a prerelease center or an institution, current offense type, and number of prior arrests. The results mirrored those in exhibit 4—work releasees were less likely, although not significantly so, to be arrested during the followup period. In other words, when background factors are controlled, conclusions are not changed.

13. Charles Logan, a corrections expert, has written on such matters for the Department of Justice and recommended that realistic goals for prison programs should be fairly narrow, achievable, and measurable within the policies and programs operated by the corrections department. He says that prison programs should be held accountable for keeping prisoners safe, in line (not committing crimes), healthy, and busy, and they should try to do all of this as efficiently as possible and without causing undue suffering. If those outcome measures are adopted (they were recently endorsed by the General Accounting Office), Washington's work release program is certainly successful. See Logan, Charles H., "Criminal Justice Performance Measures for Prisons," *Performance Measures for the Criminal Justice System*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993.

14. DiIulio, John J., Jr., "Rethinking the Criminal Justice System: Toward a New Paradigm," in *Performance Measures for the Criminal Justice System*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993:1–2.

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