

Reentry Initiatives: A Study of the Federal Workforce Development Program

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AFTER NEARLY 50 YEARS of stability, incarceration rates in America dramatically increased between 1973 and 2000 (Visher & Travis, 2003). In the last 30 years, the prison population in the United States has steadily grown, with millions of people being held in prison each year (Mallenhoff, 2009; Visher & Travis, 2003). For instance, “in 2001, America posted a new record of 1.3 million people held in prison” (Visher & Travis, 2003, p. 89). In fact, the number of persons sentenced to federal prison between 1995 and 2005 nearly doubled (Motivans, 2010). Wexler and Fletcher (2007, p. 10) reported in *The National Criminal Justice Drug Treatment Studies (CJ-DATS) Overview* that, in 2003, “it was estimated that about 6.9 million individuals were under some form of correctional control, with nearly 2.1 million in prison or jail and about 4.8 million under community supervision.”

The majority of people who enter the criminal justice system will be released into the community setting, with approximately 95 percent of state and federal prisoners returning home (Mallenhoff, 2009; Visher & Travis, 2003). In fact, Wilkinson and Rhine (2005) reported that approximately 700,000 offenders will be released annually from state and federal prisons into communities across the country. Roughly 5 million ex-offenders are under a form of community-based supervision, such as probation or parole (Mallenhoff, 2009). Out of the estimated 5 million ex-offenders, Motivans (2011) reported that between October 1, 2008, and September 30, 2009, a total of 123,371 federal offenders were under a form of supervision in a community setting.

Inevitably prisoners will complete their sentences and will be granted release into the community setting, sometimes even earlier than expected. In 2009 the Department of Justice provided explicit information regarding the early release of inmates that had successfully completed drug treatment while incarcerated:

Federal law allows the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to grant a non-violent offender up to 1 year off his/her term of imprisonment for successful completion of the Residential Drug Abuse Treatment program (Title 18 U.S.C. 3621(e)(2)). In fiscal year 2008, 4,800 inmates received a reduction in their term of imprisonment based on this law. Since the implementation of this provision in June 1995, a total of 32,618 inmates have received such a reduction (pp. 10–11).

Similarly, Wilkinson (2001) reported that as a result of changes in sentencing guidelines, the number of prisoners being released directly into the community setting without post-conviction supervision has increased by 20 percent. Consequently, our communities and community correction agencies are now challenged to address not only the rising number of offenders, but also the subsequent concerns associated with prisoner reentry.

Extant research has provided a wealth of information on reentry experiences (e.g., Belenko, Foltz, Lang, & Sung, 2004; Duff, 2010; Langan & Levin, 2002; Travis, 2005; Wexler & Fletcher, 2007; Wilkinson, 2005). This existing research on reentry has proposed various factors that may contribute to successful reentry. Protective factors that promote successful reentry include the prisoner’s length of incarceration, individual characteristics, family and

community support, health care, and employment opportunities (Sung & Belenko, 2005; Travis, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003; Wilkinson 2001). In fact, for the majority of ex-prisoners, one of the central challenges to successful reentry is employment (Bloom, Redcross, Zweig, & Azurdia, 2007), which can be implicated in the success or lack thereof in reentry.

Recently, much evidence-based research has been focusing on what types of “prisoner reentry programs, policies, and services work and which do not” (Visher, Smolter, et al., 2010, p. 2). The federal Workforce Development Program (WFD) is one specific program established to assist ex-offenders in their transition from prison into the community setting (Visher, Smolter, et al., 2010). The federal WFD is a fairly new reentry initiative that has been implemented in some United States probation offices with the aim of addressing one aspect of the challenge of prisoner reentry (Visher, Smolter, et al., 2010).

At this writing, exploratory research has only been conducted on the federal WFDs in Missouri, Louisiana, and Vermont. In addition, one pilot study was conducted on the federal WFD in Delaware. Initial research on the federal WFD found that the program was associated with increased employment rates of probationers, who subsequently showed reduced recidivism rates (Visher, Smolter, et al., 2010). This article summarizes the first study conducted on the federal WFD in the Western District of Pennsylvania.

Overall, the reentry phenomenon is multifaceted, with specific emphasis placed on risk factors and protective factors. As reentry implications appear to be unclear, even more unclear is what promotes successful prisoner

reentry. The purpose of this study was to examine characteristics of probationers that are associated with and predictive of successful reentry. As such, the following research questions for this study were:

1. What are the characteristics of probationers associated with and predictive of successful reentry?
2. Is involvement in the federal WFD predictive of successful reentry for probationers?

The rationale for this study emanated from the United States probation and pretrial services system's interest in evaluating evidence-based reentry initiatives. Increased interest in evidence-based practices stems from the growing need for service providers to demonstrate that their programs are evidence-based and contribute to the community safety goals set forth by correctional agencies (Gerace & Day, 2010). The federal probation and pretrial services system has been diligently exploring evidence-based practices in order to implement organizational and process changes to improve the outcomes of those under supervision (Gregoire, 2011). In fact, Gregoire explicitly stated that the federal probation and pretrial services system is "more purposefully identifying evidence-based principles and very consciously basing our decisions on the best evidence available" (p. 2).

Method

In order to address the purpose and specific research questions of this study, permission to use existing, de-identified data to evaluate WFD was requested and granted by the deputy chief of the U.S. Probation Office in the Western District of Pennsylvania (T. Johnson, personal communication, June 30, 2011). This research evaluated the characteristics of probationers associated with and predictive of successful reentry.

Participants

Adults serving a term of post-conviction supervision under the U.S. Probation Office in the Western District of Pennsylvania define the target population. The existing data set included 225 adult male and female offenders on federal probation in the Western District of Pennsylvania. Participants were selected in a random fashion from the participant pool.

Data Set and Variables

The data on the federal probationers was collected by Community Resource specialists and supervisors of the U.S. Probation Office in the

Western District of Pennsylvania. First, the Community Resource specialist established a list of probationers enrolled in the federal WFD in 2007 and a list of probationers enrolled in the federal WFD in 2010. Second, the Community Resource specialist took the established lists, started with the first name on each list, and then selected every third name until 75 participants were selected to establish the 2007 and 2010 WFD samples. Third, the supervisor obtained a list from the Community Resource specialist that identified probationers that were enrolled in the federal WFD in 2010. With that list the supervisor was then able to cross reference data to determine probationers that were not enrolled in the federal WFD in 2010. The supervisor randomly selected five non-WFD probationers from each U.S. probation officer's caseloads. Thus, a sample of existing data from 2010 that included 75 non-WFD participants was created.

The collected archival data was stripped of identifiers in order to create a database that does not include identifying information. Variables that were included in the database are age, race, gender, type of offense, substance abuse history, mental health history, employment history, educational history, recidivism, and whether or not the probationer was enrolled in the federal WFD. For a definition of each variable examined in this study and to identify the values of the variables, please refer to Table 1.

Data Analysis

With the exception of the continuous variable of age, this research study generated ordinal data. Regression analysis was used to examine the correlation of probationer characteristics and the phenomenon of successful reentry (Cleophas, Zwinderman, Cleophas, & Cleophas, 2009). Independent *t* test, chi-square, and logistic regression tests were

conducted on data gathered from existing records on a sample of probationers enrolled in the federal WFD and a sample of probationers not enrolled in the program.

Independent *t* Test

As seen in Figure 1, Age was the only continuous variable in this data set. As a result, an independent *t* test was conducted to compare age across participants that recidivated versus participants that did not recidivate. The independent *t* test examined independence, normality of the distribution, and the equality of variances. The age range of participants was 20 to 74 years old. Figure 1 provides a histogram of age for the participants in the data set showing that the distribution was normal. The mean for age was 41.65 ($sd = 11.30$). The median age was 40.00 and the mode was 40. The average age of participants that recidivated was 39.95 years of age and the average age of participants who did not recidivate was 42.06 years of age. To determine if recidivists were significantly younger than non-recidivists, an independent samples *t* test was conducted. The results failed to reveal a statistically significant difference ($t(223) = 1.11, p = .27$) indicating that age did not differ across groups.

Chi-Square

After determining the accuracy of the data and exploring the chi-squared assumptions, I calculated Pearson chi-square results. An alpha level of .05 ($p = .05$) was used for all statistical tests. By using the cross tabulation analysis in SPSS, a chi-square test of significance was conducted to analyze frequencies of the data. The chi-square test of significance compared observed and expected frequencies of the existing data. Because the chi-square test is a test of association, the test determined if recidivism occurred more or less often

FIGURE 1.
Age Range of Participants

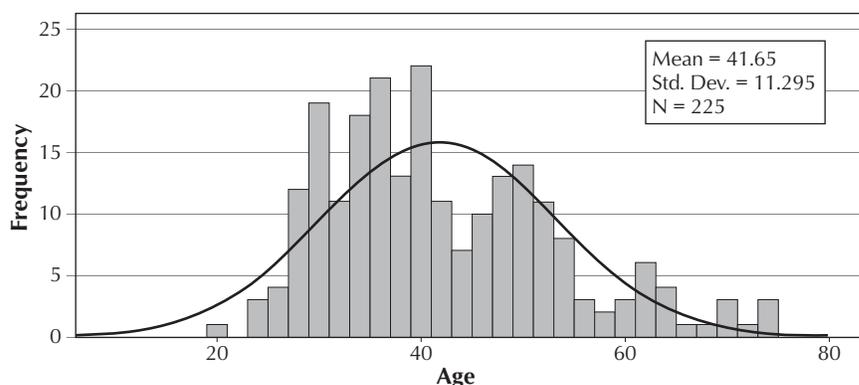


TABLE 1.
Variables, Values, and Definitions

Variables	Definitions
Group	A quantitative variable that indicates the data source of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = 2010 Non-WFD 2 = 2007 WFD 3 = 2010 WFD
Type of Offense	A quantitative variable that indicates the type of offense of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Drug Crime 2 = Violent Crime 3 = Property Crime 4 = Weapon Offense
Race	A quantitative variable that indicates the race of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Caucasian 2 = African American
Gender	A quantitative variable that indicates the gender of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Male 2 = Female
Education	A quantitative variable that indicates the education level of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = No High School 2 = GED 3 = High School 4 = Higher Education 5 = Missing
Employment	A quantitative variable that indicates the employment status of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Yes 2 = No
Recidivism	A quantitative variable that indicates the recidivism status of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Yes 2 = No
Drug and Alcohol	A quantitative variable that indicates the drug and alcohol history of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Missing
Mental Health	A quantitative variable that indicates the mental health history of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Missing
WFD	A quantitative variable that indicates WFD classification of the probationers with the following categories: 1 = Yes 2 = No

Note. WFD = Workforce Development; GED = General Equivalency Degree.

than statistically expected when probationers are categorized in terms of other variables of interest (i.e., age, gender, etc.).

When examining employment and recidivism, the results revealed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 6.76$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). Table 2 displays employment and recidivism findings. Examination of the distribution indicated that 12.7 percent of participants that were employed recidivated, whereas 26.4 percent of unemployed participants recidivated. As such, fewer employed probationers recidivated.

A chi-square test of significance was also conducted to determine if the federal WFD was a variable associated with and predictive of successful reentry. When examining WFD and recidivism, the results failed to reveal a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = .35$, $df = 1$, $p = .55$). Table 3 displays WFD and recidivism findings.

Additionally, the 2010 non-WFD group consisted of 75 participants ($n = 75$); 29.5 percent of those participants recidivated. The 2007 WFD group consisted of 75 participants ($n = 75$); 43.2 percent of those participants recidivated. The 2010 WFD group consisted of 75 participants ($n = 75$); 27.3 percent of those participants recidivated. Findings indicated that participants in the 2010 WFD group were least likely to experience recidivism. However, the chi-square test of significance determined that there were no significant findings among these groups ($\chi^2 = 2.43$, $df = 2$, $p = .30$). Table 4 displays WFD and recidivism per group.

Logistic Regression

Logistic regression was used to compute the odds of recidivism among participants. Logistic regression examined what predictor variables were more or less likely to be associated with recidivism. An omnibus test of model coefficients was used to determine how well the model performed. It provided a test of the joint predictive ability of all of the covariates in the model, accounting for all other covariates in the model simultaneously. In logistic regression, summary measures of fit are functions of a residual defined as the difference between the observed and fitted value (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

A binary logistic regression was performed with recidivism as the dependent variable. Predictor variables included type of offense, age, gender, race, education level, employment, substance abuse history, mental health history, and whether or not a probationer was enrolled in WFD. The statistic *-2 log likelihood* was used in the logistic regression to measure the success

TABLE 2.
Employment and Recidivism

	Recidivism		
	Yes	No	Total
Employment			
<i>Employed (Yes)</i>			
Count	15	103	118
Expected Count	22.7	95.3	118.0
% within Employment	12.7%	87.3%	100%
% within Recidivism	34.9%	56.9%	52.7%
% of Total	6.7%	46.0%	52.7%
<i>Employed (No)</i>			
Count	28	78	106
Expected Count	20.3	85.7	106.0
% within Employment	26.4%	73.6%	100%
% within Recidivism	65.1%	43.1%	47.3%
% of Total	12.5%	34.8%	47.3%

TABLE 3.
WFD and Recidivism

	Recidivism		
	Yes	No	Total
WFD			
<i>WFD (Yes)</i>			
Count	31	119	150
Expected Count	29.3	120.7	150.0
% within WFD	20.7%	79.3%	100%
% within Recidivism	70.5%	65.7%	66.7%
% of Total	13.8%	52.9%	66.7%
<i>WFD (No)</i>			
Count	13	62	75
Expected Count	14.7	60.3	75.0
% within WFD	17.3%	82.7%	100%
% within Recidivism	29.5%	34.3%	33.3%
% of Total	5.8%	27.6%	33.3%

of the model. A total of 225 cases were analyzed and the full model was not significantly reliable ($\chi^2 = 9.16$, $df = 13$, $p = .76$). This model accounted for between 5.1 percent and 8.4 percent of the variance in recidivism. Overall, 82.4 percent of predictions were accurate.

Limitations

This study presents with limitations. First, missing variables, the ordinal nature of the data, and use of extant data may have affected the research outcomes. For instance, the predictor variables that demonstrated the majority of missing information included drug and alcohol as well as mental health variables. Existing data showed that, of the total 225 participants, 39 participants' mental

health histories were unknown (i.e., missing) and 19 participants' drug and alcohol histories were unknown (i.e., missing).

Second, contextual factors appeared to be underrepresented in this study. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2008) labeled the race of federal offenders under supervision as Caucasian, African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native, and "other." The Hispanic population is not delineated; however, according to Petersilia (2005), Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group, representing 16 percent of the current prison population. Therefore, the Hispanic race may be underrepresented or mislabeled as "other." For this study, existing data collected was limited

because Caucasians and African Americans were the only identified races. In terms of race, this study concluded that 38.6 percent of Caucasians and 61.4 percent of African Americans recidivated. The ability to classify contextual factors will need to be addressed in order to achieve culturally sensitive research.

Third, this research lacks statistical significance in relation to the confounding variables. When conducting field research, it is difficult to regulate all of the predictor variables that may have affected the participants in this research. A wide array of confounding variables may include intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to treatment, prior treatment experiences (i.e., drug and alcohol and/or mental health treatment prior to incarceration, while incarcerated or post incarceration), prior vocational training, or exposure to educational programs.

Another potential confound is related to the Community Resource specialist and the probation officer. For the most part, the Community Resource specialists and probation officers remain constant in the participant's reentry experience. Therefore, it is likely that the Community Resource specialist's and probation officer's skills improved over time, especially since enrollment in the WFD is open ended. Although it is assumed that a consistent WFD treatment protocol was used, it is probable that those working with the probationer have improved in the execution of that protocol over time. This is to be considered when exploring increased successful reentry experiences for participants involved in the 2010 WFD compared to their 2007 counterparts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To summarize, conclusions regarding the research as well as recommendations for future research are presented. It may be concluded that the WFD, as designed and implemented, was not predictive of successful reentry. It may further be concluded that of all the predictor variables examined, employment was the only variable that was predictive of successful reentry.

Research on a larger sample that contains more diverse demographics may lead to a better understanding of predictor variables associated with successful reentry. Use of random assignment of program participants, rather than use of existing groups, would result in a stronger research design. The sample for this research was demographically limited (i.e., age, gender, and race). Also, the research seemed to under-represent

TABLE 4.
WFD Per Group and Recidivism

	Recidivism		
	Yes	No	Total
WFD Groups			
<i>Non-WFD 2010</i>			
Count	13	62	75
Expected Count	14.7	60.3	75.0
% within WFD Groups	17.3%	82.7%	100%
% within Recidivism	29.5%	34.3%	33.3%
% of Total	5.8%	27.6%	33.3%
<i>WFD 2007</i>			
Count	19	56	75
Expected Count	14.7	60.3%	75.0
% within WFD Groups	25.3%	74.7%	100%
% within Recidivism	43.2%	30.9%	33.3%
% of Total	8.4%	24.9%	33.3%
<i>WFD 2010</i>			
Count	12	63	75
Expected Count	14.7	60.3	75.0
% within WFD Groups	16.0%	84.0%	100%
% within Recidivism	27.3%	34.8%	33.3%
% of Total	5.3%	28.0%	33.3%

contextual factors, substance abuse histories, and mental health histories.

Prior research has discovered that offenders' drug and alcohol and mental health histories have a profound impact on their reentry experience. In fact, Petersilia (2003) reported that offenders who were originally convicted of drug-related crimes had the second highest rate of recidivism. However, since a number of the participants' drug and alcohol as well as mental health histories were unknown, they may have been underrepresented and under-identified in this study. Untreated mental illnesses within the community may result in a person's propensity towards criminal activity. Furthermore, when considering the effect of substance abuse on employment, probationers are unlikely to obtain or sustain employment if they cannot pass a drug screen. Similarly, if a probationer is actively abusing mood-altering chemicals, the probationer could be placing himself or herself and others at risk in the workplace, not to mention how negatively drug use can impact overall work performance.

Moreover, substance abuse disorders may mimic symptoms of mood or personality disorders. Active use of mood-altering chemicals can present as the primary concern and can mask underlying mental health symptoms. Thus, offenders could be misdiagnosed and

dual diagnoses may be overlooked. This study did not identify substance abuse or mental health variables as significant in addressing successful reentry. However, while these two variables alone may not be significant, yet it is possible that addressing these variables collectively may lead to significant findings.

As a result, suggestions include clinical assessment of the probationer and collaborative efforts among providers. It is suggested that offenders who are identified as having either drug and alcohol histories or mental health histories be accurately assessed for co-occurring disorders and be recommended for treatment that will concurrently address their presenting clinical needs. Accurate substance abuse, substance dependence, and mental health diagnosis is not only essential for proper treatment but also critical to appropriate program evaluation. It is hoped that more accurate assessment will lead to effective treatment, resulting in decreased recidivism.

Additionally, this research explored specific offenses, including drug crimes, violent crimes, property crimes, and weapon offenses. Further research may need to be conducted on criteria for sentencing guidelines. Even if a person is charged with a violent crime, this crime might be related to a substance-induced state. Furthermore, about half of all offenders

reported being under the influence of mood-altering chemicals during the commission of their crimes, which subsequently led to their incarceration (Shivy et al., 2007). This information may be important when exploring reentry treatment needs.

In general, further research is necessary on the WFD program itself. As previously mentioned, the WFD is a relatively new reentry initiative. As defined by Visher et al. (2010), the WFD provides "men and women under community supervision with assistance to increase their job readiness (including education and vocational skills), identify potential employers, and develop resumes and interview skills with the goals of obtaining full-time employment and reducing recidivism" (p. 2). This definition may need to be refined to best describe the WFD in the Western District of Pennsylvania. For future research, a comprehensive definition of WFD and solid theoretical basis are needed.

Advances in reentry initiatives such as the WFD appear to be directly linked to definition and theoretical considerations. Continued research could further explore the administration of WFD program components, such as the services offered to probationers and how the services are being implemented (i.e., career assessments, resume building, rap sheet expungement, driver's license restoration, job club, cognitive thinking courses, along with workshops that address financial literacy and homeownership). However, these services seem to be individualized based on the assessed needs of the probationer. Consideration may need to be given for curriculum development to enhance the consistency of what the program can offer. Record keeping and data collection could be improved by detailing what services each probationer receives and the length of time involved in each service. Future research could then explore what services appear to be most beneficial in promoting successful reentry.

Future research is also needed to explore the meaningfulness of rapport between the U.S. probation office and the probationer. Carl Rodgers endorsed a humanistic psychology that proposed that those in a superior or "expert" position (U.S. probation employee) can create a growth-promoting climate in which individuals (probationers) can move forward and become what they are capable of becoming (Corey, 2001). Attributes that are said to create a growth-promoting climate include genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding (Corey, 2001). If such attributes are communicated

by the “expert,” probationers may become less defensive and better able to engage in pro-social and constructive behaviors. Subsequently, further qualitative research may be warranted to explore the impact of relationships between the probationer and the U.S. probation employee to determine if the quality of relationship is predictive of successful reentry

Further research is warranted to adequately address differences in employment rates among the WFD participants and the non-WFD participants. What causes differences in employment rates between these two groups? Differences may result from the offender’s perceived need, or lack thereof, for WFD. Involvement in the WFD is voluntary; however, the offender’s perception of enrollment in WFD may not be such. For example, if the offender is experiencing difficulty obtaining employment and the probation officer suggests involvement in the WFD to address this need, the probationer may view this as a negative reentry intervention that involves increased monitoring. Furthermore, the probationer may identify involvement with WFD as an adverse consequence associated with lack of employment, which may prompt resistance to the programming.

It is recommended that WFD data collection and record keeping practices be revised. For probationers enrolled in the WFD program, the probationer’s motivation should be recorded as either extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. This could be accomplished by assessing the stage of change of the probationer at the time of admission. Reassessment of the stages of change could occur every 60 to 90 days and be recorded accordingly. Recording the stages of change could be a valuable tool to enhance future evidence-based studies.

Utilizing a pretest-posttest design and implementing an updated career assessment tool could be effective ways to accomplish such a task. Pretest-posttest control group designs could be implemented within the group of WFD participants alone or could be implemented with a group of WFD participants and a group of non-WFD participants. Not only does the pretest-posttest design allow a researcher to examine the individual performance of specific participants, but it allows a researcher to compare participant groups and measure the degree of change that occurred as a result of involvement in WFD (Heppner et al., 2008).

Time-series design could be beneficial in further exploring the effectiveness of WFD by examining multiple observations over time

(Heppner et al., 2008). For instance, a time-series design could account for WFD trends over time. This study indicated that the 2010 WFD participants experienced decreased recidivism rates compared to their 2007 WFD counterparts. By incorporating a time-series design, specific reasons for this change over time could be identified.

As evidenced by findings, this research concludes that employment is a predictor of successful reentry. Providing probationers with the tools to become employable appears to be critical in addressing the reentry epidemic. In order to accomplish this, reentry initiatives will benefit from future research so that appropriate interventions can aid in reducing recidivism rates and support successful reentry.

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