MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

AN OUTCOME EVALUATION OFMINNESOTA'S PRISON WORK RELEASE PROGRAM: ESTIMATING ITS EFFECTS ON RECIDIVISM, EMPLOYMENT AND COST AVOIDANCE

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The Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) recently completed an outcome evaluation of its work release program. The evaluation assessed the program's effects on recidivism and employment among 3,570 offenders. The average follow-up period for the offenders in this study was four years. The evaluation also included a cost-benefit analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

- Work release had a significant effect on all four recidivism measures
  - Work release significantly reduced reoffending by:
    - 16 percent for rearrest
    - 14 percent for reconviction
    - 17 percent for reincarceration for a new offense
  - Work release significantly increased the risk of revocation by 76 percent
- Work release improved several post-release employment outcomes
  - Participants were significantly more likely to obtain employment
  - Participant were also more likely to work more hours and earn higher total wages
- Work release reduced costs by an estimated $1.25 million.
- The benefit per participant was nearly $700

Minnesota's work release program was established by statute in 1967. Operated by the DOC, work release is designed to help offenders make a successful transition from prison to the community by providing them with stable housing and opportunities to secure employment. The program offers early release to prisoners who are expected to work at paid employment or participate in approved vocational programming while they are housed in a county jail, jail annex, or community corrections residential facility. Because participants are granted early release from prison and are typically required to reimburse the state for part of their confinement costs, work release may also help reduce prison overcrowding and decrease correctional costs.

The effectiveness of the work release program was evaluated by examining recidivism and post-release employment outcomes among 3,570 offenders released from prison between 2007 and 2010. During this four-year period, 1,785 offenders were released from prison and participated in work release. Offenders released during the 2007-2010 period who did not participate in work release were matched to the work release participants on commonly-known risk factors. Multivariate statistical analyses were performed to further control for other factors besides work release participation that may have had an impact on recidivism and post-release employment. These measures were used to ensure that any observed differences in recidivism and/or post-release employment between the 1,785 work release participants and the 1,785 offenders in the comparison group were due strictly to participation in work release. The evaluation also assessed whether the program is cost effective by comparing program operating costs with any benefits resulting from improved recidivism and employment outcomes.

Recidivism Results

Work release participants had lower recidivism rates than the comparison group offenders for three of the four measures examined. For example, 61 percent of the work release participants had been rearrested for a new offense by the end of 2012 compared with 64 percent of the control group offenders. The results also show that 45 percent of the work release participants were reconvicted for a new offense compared to 48 percent in the comparison group. In addition, 19 percent of the work release participants were reincarcerated for a new felony compared to 22 percent of the comparison group. At 43 percent, the revocation rate for work release participants was much higher than the 29 percent rate observed for the comparison group.

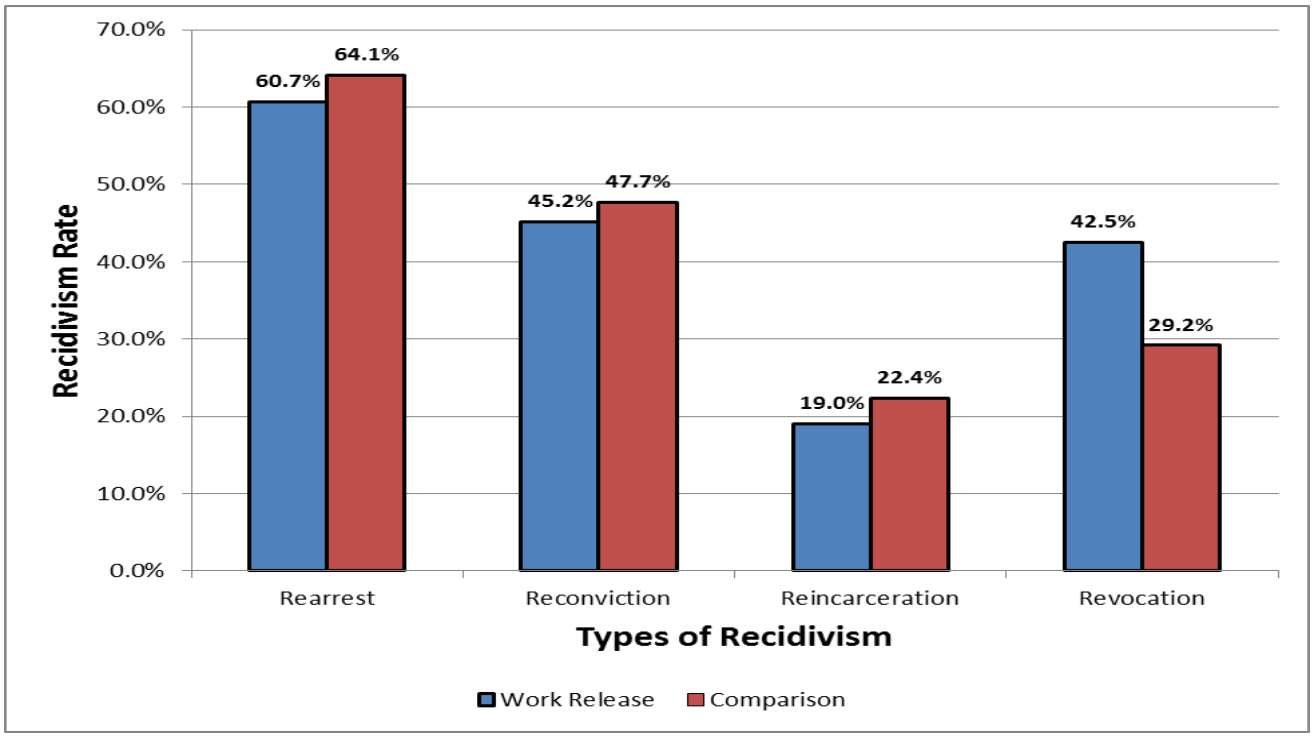

Figure 1. Recidivism Rates for Work Release and Comparison Group Offenders

The results from the multivariate statistical analyses, which controlled for time at risk and other observed differences between the two groups, showed that participating in work release had a statistically significant effect on all four recidivism measures. Work release participation significantly lowered the risk of recidivism by 16 percent for rearrest, 14 percent for reconviction, and 17 percent for new offense reincarceration. For technical violation revocations, however, work release significantly increased the risk by 76 percent.

Post-Release Employment Results

Table 1 shows that 84 percent of the work release participants obtained employment during the first year following their release from prison. By comparison, 45 percent of the offenders in the comparison group found post-release employment. Although there was little difference in the average hourly wage between the two groups, work release participants worked nearly 500 more hours, on average, than those in the comparison group. As a result, total wages earned during the follow-up period were, on average, nearly $5,000 greater for work release participants in comparison to those in the comparison group.

Table 1. Employment Results for Work Release and Comparison Group Offenders

Post-Release Employment	*Work Release*	*Comparison Group*
Obtained Employment	84%	45%
Average Hourly Wage*	$14.89	$14.63
Average Total Hours Worked	835	337
Average Total Wages	$9,437	$4,576
N	1,785	1,785

* Based on offenders who obtained employment (Work Release = 1,501; Comparison = 795)

Cost-Benefit Results

The results from the cost-benefit analysis indicated that the costs associated with revocations outweighed those avoided from reduced reoffending, producing an estimated $750,000 in increased costs. Still, work release generated more than $1.5 million in benefits from early release and another $500,000 from increased state income taxes. As a result, work release program produced roughly $1.25 million in costs avoided for the 2007-2010 period, which amounts to a benefit of nearly $700 per participant.

Summary

Due perhaps as a consequence of more consistent employment, work release produced a modest decrease in reoffending. Yet, the recidivism outcomes were still mixed given that work release significantly increased the risk of revocation for a technical violation. The cost avoidance estimates would have been greater had the program produced better recidivism outcomes, especially for technical violation revocations.

There may be a few reasons why the program did not yield more positive recidivism results. First, research suggests that employment is a moderate, rather than a major, recidivism risk factor for offenders. Second, even though employment addresses a

criminogenic need, offenders often have multiple need areas that contribute to their recidivism risk. When offenders are placed on work release, they seldom participate in any other interventions that mitigate recidivism risk such as cognitive-behavioral programming or chemical dependency treatment.

In general, the findings demonstrate work release is successful in improving employment outcomes for offenders. Due to increased state income tax contributions from work release participants, combined with cost reductions resulting from early release, the results from this evaluation indicate work release is a cost-effective correctional program.