

Executive Summary: Research Supporting Employment as an Important Component of Evidence-Based Practice
By U.S. Probation Office, Eastern District of Missouri, January 20, 2009

The scientific evidence is remarkably consistent that people who desist from crime are those who are better integrated into pro-social roles in the family, workplace and community (What Works, pgs. 29-31).

Desistance from crime was a major focus of a recent study conducted by a committee of researchers for National Research Council (NRC) (Petersilia et al. 2008). In the report entitled *Parole, Desistance from Crime, and Community Integration* (pgs 21-25), Petersilia and her colleagues on the committee identified family and work as being particularly important in the desistance process. Marriage, especially strong marital attachment, is a significant factor in desistance for men and to a lesser extent for women. Strong ties to work and stable employment also can lead to desistance. Other factors such as education and reduced consumption of drugs promote desistance, too.

The NRC committee's findings have important implications for corrections and public safety policy. Given the importance of stable employment and marriage, public policies that block employment and other opportunities for ex-offenders to resume a regular life in the community are likely to serve as a barrier to desistance, eventually leading to higher rates of reentry failure. Conversely, programs and policies that reduce criminogenic risk and need factors and promote successful reentry are likely to lead to higher rates of desistance and greater public safety. These risk/need factors include criminal attitudes, thinking and values, unstable living arrangements, lack of employment, antisocial peer associations, problems with substance abuse, and lack of self-control.

Research has consistently shown that crime and unemployment are linked, and that one of the most important conditions that leads to less offending is a strong tie to meaningful employment. Offenders that have the lowest level of educational skills, and are therefore less employable, are also the most likely to return to prison time and time again (What Works, pgs. 38-42).

Extensive research has demonstrated that strong ties to work can lead to desistance of offending. Based on the scientific evidence, education and vocational training programs work. They increase the rate of employment for ex-offenders, and meaningful work is an important contributor to less offending. More importantly, the evidence clearly shows that they reduce recidivism and provide a positive return on investment.

A meta-analysis of the outcomes of 53 different education, vocation, and work programs concluded that in each case, education programs increase employment and reduce recidivism. A meta-analysis of 26 studies evaluating the effectiveness of vocational and work programs, including prison industries, concluded that vocational training increased the employment rates and reduce the recidivism rates of program participants. Prison-based vocational training programs provided an average of \$5.76 in taxpayer benefits to every \$1 of cost.

The Urban Institute reports that to be effective, employment programs should focus on skills applicable to the job market, be delivered close to an offender's release so that the skills and work habits are internalized by the offender, be integrated with other programs, and followed by transitional services in the community.

The Hamilton Project by the Brookings Institution proposes a national reentry program as a sequence of stages that prepares people for work in the open labor market (From Prison to Work, pgs. 14-22). In this sequence, prison education and discharge planning is preparatory for transitional jobs and other transitional services in the community. National education standards and parole reform are also recommended. Evaluation studies show that transitional jobs by themselves reduce recidivism by 20 percent. By expanding prison education and program effects under a system of graduated parole sanctions, the national reentry program would produce a 25 percent reduction of new arrests. Considering that 67.5 percent of parolees return to prison, and with the annual cost of a prison bed being about \$27,000, diverting one hundred fifty thousand parolees saves about \$4 billion each year in correctional costs.

A systematic review of 16 rigorous comparison-group evaluations by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (pg.9) showed employment and job training in the community reduced recidivism by 4.3% and provided a cost-benefit of \$4,359 per participant. Vocational training in prison also reduced recidivism by 9% and provided a cost benefit of \$13,738 per participant. These studies indicate that treatment-oriented supervision programs reduced recidivism and provided taxpayers with a sound return on investment. Conversely, surveillance-oriented programs failed to reduce recidivism and their costs exceeded their benefits.