

**Ohio's Reentry Coalitions: Year 1 Evaluation, Center for Criminal Justice Research, University of Cincinnati. Edward Latessa, PhD, Principal Investigator; Brian Lovins, MSW, Project Director; Jennifer Lux, MS, Research Associate; and Bobbie Ticknor, MS, Research Associate**

If the previous two decades were defined by "get tough" policies, the next two decades will be identified as the Reentry Era. With over 700,000 offenders returning from prison annually, and another 13 million exiting local jails, the criminal justice system has reached a tipping point in which it can no longer successfully address the needs of offenders as they transition back to their communities (Petersilia, 2003). Recent studies have found that nearly one in two inmates return to prison within a three-year period, highlighting the inadequacies of the current system to address future recidivism. At the same time, the traditional mechanism for offender reentry—parole – has undergone changes that have resulted in higher caseloads with less focus on rehabilitation (Travis, Solomon, and Waul, 2001).

As the field refocuses its efforts on developing effective reentry policies, as well as programs, it is important to consider the ramifications of doing nothing. More than 14 million offenders go to jail or prison each year and with recidivism rates nearing 50%, communities cannot afford to allow this trend to continue (Glaze and Palla, 2005). For example, in Ohio, it costs almost \$24,000 to incarcerate an adult male for one year, not including collateral costs of wage loss, increased instability in the community and within their family, or the cost of post-incarceration supervision. With Ohio's inmate population surpassing 55,000 inmates in 2009, the cost of prison has topped \$1.7 billion. If reentry programs can reduce recidivism by 30% over treatment as usual, the state could save over \$100 million in the first year (Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2009).

Given the limitations of previous research, it is often difficult to glean why some offenders re-integrate successfully, while others fail within the first few months. The current research is an attempt to isolate those characteristics that are correlated with successful reintegration. More specifically, the research questions to be addressed by this project sought to examine several Ohio reentry programs to determine whether or not the programs will be more successful at reducing offender recidivism if they:

- focus on higher risk offenders;
- target criminogenic needs;
- use cognitive-behavioral or social learning interventions;
- address implementation issues such as staff, training, and evaluation; and
- follow program integrity (i.e., adhere to the principles of effective intervention).

That being said, the purpose of this report is to describe the procedures, methodology, and overall findings from the evaluations of the 14 counties that make up the ARRA-funded JAG Reentry Coalitions in the state of Ohio.

In 2009, the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services partnered with the Ohio Ex-offender Reentry Coalition to develop the ARRA JAG Reentry Initiative. The Reentry Initiative involved two components; one component concentrated on directly funded projects and another involved a research component that examined the effectiveness of the ARRA JAG Reentry Initiative Projects through both an outcome and a process evaluation. In order to identify which directly funded projects would be selected for participation in the initiative, a solicitation was developed that sought information from potential applicants about the community need, current capacity, proposed project activities, and proposed project costs.

The Initiative allocated \$4.7 million to fund 14 community reentry projects through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, Edward Byrne Memorial: Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program. There were six counties that were awarded Category I grants. The Category I awards were intended to support existing county or regional reentry task forces who identified specific gaps in the capacity to deliver direct services for those offenders returning to their community from the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. The Category I projects received grant funds specifically

for delivery of supportive services or additional programs that would help the local coalition to better accomplish the goals specified in the County's Five-year Strategic Plan. There were eight reentry coalition task forces who were awarded Category II grants. Category II awards were intended to support local counties or regions that wished to *develop* a formal reentry task force, with the expectation that the primary outcome for this category would be the development of a County Five-year Strategic plan.

The research component of the ARRA JAG Reentry Initiative required the release of a separate solicitation. The Initiative allocated \$307,000 to a single entity that demonstrated the best proposed plan for conducting both a process evaluation and an outcome evaluation in order to determine the effectiveness of the ARRA JAG Reentry Initiative Projects. The University of Cincinnati was selected through a competitive grant process as the evaluator of the 14 reentry projects. There were three overall goals for the evaluation that included:

- Assess the quality of each project's program implementation (Categories I and II) and success in achieving program objectives (Category I).
- Assess each project's ability to compete for Second Chance Act (SCA) funding, including programmatic guidelines and required outcomes.
- Assess each project's consistency with the Ohio Five-year Strategic Plan.

The study examines the effects of adopting evidence based interventions as well as ecological approaches employed by the ARRA JAG Reentry programs. Specifically, the University of Cincinnati's Center for Criminal Justice Research conducted process evaluations on 14 Category I and II programs and outcome evaluations on six Category I programs to determine if the Reentry Coalitions were on the right track. One of the difficulties in evaluating newly designed programs or initiatives is that it takes a while for the programs to work out the "bugs." Latessa and Lowenkamp (2005) found that programs did not generally show significant effects until they were in operation for at least three years. Therefore, it can be difficult to determine if programs that have been in operation for less than three years are effective in reducing recidivism. For this reason, process evaluations are typically used to determine if the programs are "on track" to reduce recidivism.

The process evaluations of the 14 ARRA JAG Reentry projects consisted of a collection of evaluation procedures including a review of each county's Five-year Strategic Plan, surveys of community partners, face-to-face interviews of coalition members, agency partners, and ex-offenders, as well as on-site assessments of the service delivery. Information at the coalition level focused on measuring the collaborative relationship with stakeholders, as well as characteristics of individual programs. In order to measure specific programmatic elements of the Reentry Coalitions, each Task Force was assessed using the Evidence Based Correctional Program Checklist (CPC). In addition to the CPC, the Community Organizational Assessment Tool (COAT) was used to measure the collaborative relationship between coalition members and stakeholders. Common trends found in both the CPC and COAT survey, across all 14 reentry sites, are discussed in this report and summarized below.

## **FINDINGS**

**Demographics:** The majority of the Reentry Coalitions serve both male and female ex-offenders returning to their communities or surrounding areas upon release. During the evaluation period, 1,785 participants were served by one of the 14 Reentry initiatives. Table 1 provides demographic data related to the ex-offenders enrolled across all counties served by the Reentry Coalitions.

**Table 1: Numbers Served and Demographics of Ex-Offenders  
Participating in the ARRA Jag Reentry Coalitions**

Clients Served	N = 1,785	
	N	Percent (%)
<b>Age</b>		
Below 17	7	.42
18 - 25	350	21.16
26 – 34	465	28.11
35 and Older	832	50.30
<b>Race</b>		
American Indian or Alaska Native	9	.50
Asian	3	.17
Black or African American	809	45.32
White	861	48.24
Unknown	97	4.34
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	1518	85.04
Female	267	14.96
<b>Education</b>		
Associate	51	2.87
Bachelor	19	1.07
GED	471	26.52
High School Diploma	672	37.84
Less than High School Degree/GED	562	31.64

**The Community Organizational Assessment Tool:** Overall, results indicated the majority of Task Force members, in general, believe that their group is organized and has effective collaboration. The data also showed that each Task Force has established goals and ways to achieve those goals. A majority of those surveyed believe that once priorities are established, all of their energy, resources and activities are focused on these priorities. Additionally, survey takers also said the coalition has translated their priorities into specific desired outcomes and strategies to achieve these outcomes. Finally, it appears that each Task Force seeks proven programs and best practice principles in all the activities or programs that they design or fund.

**Best Practices for Community Support and Accountability:** Overall, results indicated that the majority of Task Force members who responded to the survey rated each principle as moderate (a value of 3 on the scale) to very high (a value of 5 on the scale). A majority of the respondents indicated that measurable outcomes are defined for the Reentry Coalition. When asked if evidence-based strategies are used, the ratings tended to be towards the higher end of the scale by almost all respondents. The one area where there was less support was for the principle of family and social support. Finally, the Best Practices for Community Support and Accountability section asks about performance measurement indicators in the Coalition. Here, the responses are more varied, but for the most part, the majority of respondents agree that performance measurement is in place to track activities, outputs and outcome.

**Community Safety Net Collaboration:** A majority of respondents indicated that the Coalition has led to greater networking and exchange of information among members. Further, all respondents indicated that their Coalition has brought together people/organizations who would not have worked together otherwise. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a majority of respondents indicated that their Reentry Coalition has directly benefitted ex-offenders in the community and

that the coalition has increased public awareness of the needs of the ex-offenders they are serving.

**Community Collaboration**: One area in which consensus was not met across respondents was the Coalition's focus on the strengths and needs of the community. The survey responses suggested that a smaller proportion of the respondents believed that their coalition accessed the community's strengths while providing services. It is recommended that the Reentry Coalitions work together to identify those strengths of the community that they can leverage in supporting the returning offenders. A second area of the assessment that consensus was not met was the identification of a common mission statement. A common mission and/or vision statement ensures that the coalition is committed to the underlying vision and maintains focus on the appropriate population.

**The Correctional Program Checklist (CPC)**: The CPC is divided into two basic areas: CAPACITY and CONTENT. The CAPACITY area is designed to measure whether a correctional program has the capability to deliver evidence-based interventions and services for offenders. There are three domains in the capacity area including: 1) Leadership and Development, 2) Staff, and 3) Quality Assurance. The CONTENT area focuses on the substantive domains of 1) Offender Assessment and 2) Treatment Characteristics, and the extent to which the program meets the principles of risk, need, responsivity, and treatment. There are a total of 77 indicators.

### ***Leadership, Management, and Support***

#### ***Strengths:***

- Within all counties, the director is professionally trained in a helping profession. Regular meetings take place between the director and staff.
- Each director also had a significant role in selecting agency staff.
- Funding was also rated adequate and stable in the majority of the counties.
- Within every county, staff are rated as knowledgeable on the goals, values, and mission and each are clearly defined.
- There are also collaborative processes with all stakeholders.
- Reentry Coalitions have good relationships with partners and key stakeholders in the community. Monthly meetings with partners occur and subcommittees have been developed over the last several months.

#### ***Areas Recommended for Improvement (focus on in the upcoming years):***

- Piloting new aspects to the program
- Delivery of evidence-based practices
- Need to be active in promoting EBP

### ***Staff Characteristics***

#### ***Strengths:***

- Majority of staff members are sufficiently educated in helping professions.
- Have adequate experience in programs with ex-offenders involved in the criminal justice system.
- Staff are selected and promoted based on skills and values such as strong support for ex-offender treatment and change, empathy, fairness, the ability to be non-confrontational but firm, problem solving, and prior life experiences and training.
- Regular meetings take place between management and staff.

- The vast majority of supervisors and staff support the use of evidence based practices.
- Ethical guidelines dictate staff boundaries and interactions with ex-offenders.

***Areas Recommended for Improvement (focus on in the upcoming years):***

- Evaluations of Program Delivery
- Training

***Assessment***

- Some counties use a validated risk and need assessment with all of the ex-offenders participating in the program.
- Several counties in the coalitions have not fully adopted a validated, standardized, and objective risk/needs assessment.
- Some members of the Reentry Coalitions have made the determination that they will serve all types of offenders returning to the community, including sex offenders and domestic violence perpetrators. ***However, these counties (or one of the providers) do not have access to specialized assessments for unique populations (e.g., sex offenders).***
- The majority of the Reentry Coalitions do not conduct (or refer out to a program to conduct) additional assessments on all participants as they enter the program.
- The majority of the Reentry Coalitions do not assess for risk on all offenders, so they are unable to provide more intensive services for offenders receiving services. Therefore, a lower risk offender receives the same level of intervention as does the higher risk offenders.
- The majority of the Reentry Coalitions have not adopted a policy that ensures that participants are reassessed on a regular basis.
- Currently, if case plans are developed they are developed by each individual program forcing the participant to follow multiple case plans.

***Evidence Based Practices***

***Strengths:***

- The majority of the Reentry Coalitions have established relationships with community providers to deliver services to ex-offenders.
- In a majority of the counties, the community providers have adopted some services that are identified as evidence based or use cognitive-behavioral models. ***This indicates that, overall, the majority of the counties are targeting appropriate criminogenic needs.***

***Areas Recommended for Improvement (focus on in the upcoming years):***

- Evidence Based Programming
- Range of Services
- Dosage and Type of Programming
- Reducing Barriers
- Completion Criteria
- Use of Reinforcers
- Family Programming
- Skill Building
- Release Prevention Plan

## *Quality Assurance*

### ***Strengths:***

- Overall, the majority of the Reentry Coalitions examines clients' re-arrest and reconviction on a regular basis in order to measure recidivism.

### ***Areas Recommended for Improvement (focus on in the upcoming years):***

- One of the major gaps in providing services to offenders is the ability to ensure that offenders are receiving appropriate services, attending an adequate dosage, and are making substantial progress. The Reentry Coalitions and their partners do not currently monitor services being provided to the offender to ensure that the offender's needs are being met.
- One of the benefits of the Reentry Coalitions is they provide a centralized location that all data regarding participants can be submitted and offender progress tracked. Currently, data on the participants are not collected and presented in a fashion that can be used by community providers to understand the effects of the program.

*For a complete copy of the study please go to:*

## **REFERENCES**

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