

# Bolstering the Prison-Based Apprenticeship and Workforce Training System



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## Takeaways

The American incarceration system suffers from a range of issues on everything from overcrowding to the logistical difficulty of providing food, health care, and services to its 1.8 million residents. Amid this, there's the challenge of providing training and education to incarcerated individuals to ensure they have a shot at attaining livable occupations upon release. In this, we unpack the issues with the current prison-based training system from program design failures to inadequate funding. We then offer a series of policy solutions that would help reduce recidivism and improve economic mobility, such as creating jail-based American Job Centers and expanding intermediary organizations that serve those who are incarcerated.

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Even with a dip in incarceration due to the pandemic, the United States still suffers from the highest incarceration rate per capita across the world.<sup>1</sup> Last year, there were more than 1.8 million incarcerated men and women serving time in the United States.<sup>2</sup> On top of that, 600,000 people are released from prison each year, and over 4.5 million are under parole or supervision. Altogether, there is an average of 6.7 million justice-involved individuals across the country.<sup>3</sup>

There are numerous disparities among this vulnerable population. Twenty-five percent of incarcerated adults don't have a high school degree or General Equivalency Diploma (GED), compared to 13% of the US population, and they are 8 times less likely to complete college.<sup>4</sup> Black and Hispanic people make up 12.6% and 18% of the general population, respectively, but 38.2% and 30.4% of the prison population.<sup>5</sup> And roughly 44% of formerly incarcerated adults are rearrested within the first year of being released, 68% within three years, and after nine years, upwards of 83% are sent back behind bars.<sup>6</sup>

After being released, formerly incarcerated adults face severe barriers to upward economic mobility. The average unemployment rate among the formerly incarcerated is 27%, higher than the total US unemployment rate across any period in the country's history.<sup>7</sup> Due to many factors, including long spells of unemployment and a lack of work history, criminal records account for 34% of all nonworking men aged 25-54.<sup>8</sup> The incarceration system costs the United States and justice-involved people a minimum of \$182 billion a year, including the cost to the economy in foregone GDP from having a smaller workforce.<sup>9</sup> Across the labor market, education, housing, financial security, retirement, and countless other metrics, the formerly incarcerated are relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, contributing to viciously high rates of recidivism.

Among the many solutions proposed to both lower recidivism rates and improve the economic outcomes of returning citizens is job and educational training. While training alone is not nearly enough to support formerly incarcerated individuals, research has shown that people who participated in vocational and educational training while incarcerated were 43% less likely to be rearrested and 30% more likely to be employed soon after being released.<sup>10</sup> Among these training opportunities are apprenticeships, a proven earn-and-learn model that provide participants with useful, portable skills and which significantly expand participants' post-release economic outcomes.

Unfortunately, in 2020, of the 223,000 new apprentices registered across the country, just over 8,100 came from correctional facilities.<sup>11</sup> With President Biden and Congressional Democrats committed to creating 1 to 2 million new apprenticeships across existing and emerging industries over the next decade, expanding and significantly improving apprenticeships in the prison system offers a strong avenue towards improving economic outcomes for returning citizens. In this report, we unpack the issues with the current prison-based training system and offer a series of policy

solutions that would genuinely help reduce recidivism, improve economic mobility, and strengthen the broader workforce.

## **Problems with the Prison-Based Workforce Model**

As the world's largest prison complex, the American incarceration system suffers from a range of issues on everything from overcrowding to budget constraints and the logistical difficulty of providing food, health care, and services to its 1.8 million residents. Amid this, there's the challenge of providing training and education to incarcerated individuals to ensure they have a shot at attaining livable occupations upon release. Currently, however, the prison-based workforce model faces two broad obstacles.

### **#1: Program Design Failures**

Across the country, the prison-based workforce model has a series of structural issues that prevent incarcerated individuals from getting adequate skills.

Among the most prominent is a *lack of in-demand occupations* offered across prisons and, thus, relevant on-the-job training. Approximately 74% of prison-based workers have roles in facility management. Similarly, although there are more than 126 apprenticeship occupations offered in prison, they are concentrated in jobs that are necessary for prison maintenance, such as cooks, plumbers, housekeeping, and landscape.<sup>12</sup> While many of these roles exist as apprenticeships outside of prison, the vast majority consist of low-paying jobs that are far from the in-demand occupations that most apprenticeship expansion today is attempting to capture.

Even more limiting, the occupations that do exist are often constrained by a *lack of work*. Since many jobs, such as machine repair and plumbing, are provided by prisons, they are only taught when the work is needed for routine prison maintenance. Generally, inmates who successfully enroll in an apprenticeship occupation are underworked and miss out on important opportunities to learn on the job.<sup>13</sup> While private businesses sometimes offer work through prison contracts, these are the exception.<sup>14</sup>

Further, *transfers are extremely disruptive* and impede inmates' training. The percentage of prisoners who live in their state of residence varies across the country, with a low of 5% for Wyoming and a high of 45% for Hawaii, and the average distance of a prison transfer across state lines is more than 1,200 miles.<sup>15</sup> The impact of transfers has been underestimated. Along with reducing their contact to family and friends and reducing their sense of stability, prison transfers have been shown to be counterproductive to prison-based workforce efforts. This is especially true for prison-based apprentices and students when their transfer does not include reinstatement in their program due to time constraints or lack of programming at their newly assigned prison site.

The *lack of relationship-building between employers and prisons* is another factor that reduces employment prospects and increases the risk that returning citizens will slip into long bouts of

unemployment. Without strong pathways into the labor force, inmates enter the job market severely underprepared, including long absences of work history on their resume, low levels of professional contacts, and the stigma associated with having interacted with the justice system. Despite evidence that correctional and workforce agencies can successfully band together to provide returning citizens with job and post-release services, these features have not been made a permanent fixture of the criminal justice system.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, *the majority of incarcerated workers are unpaid or paid drastically below the minimum wage*. As of 2019, the average starting hourly wage for inmate apprentices was \$0.57 cents, with over 4,800 not receiving any pay.<sup>17</sup> This presents hard challenges for inmates, as they often return to their communities with little in savings, and possibly with legal-related fines or fees, child support payments, and an urgent need to find housing. The latter is especially difficult for single mothers who must show proof of housing and a steady income and lifestyle in order to apply for custody of their children.<sup>18</sup>

## **# 2: Inadequate Funding**

The Bureau of Prisons receives an annual budget appropriation that is used to cover salary and benefits, rent, and everyday operations including utilities, food, and health care for its more than 1.8 million staff and inmates. The system heavily depends on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for its offering of correctional education and job training programs.

Overall, however, budgets are relatively small and vary by state, as WIOA funding is disbursed using formula funding.<sup>19</sup> It is up to each state government to decide how funds are distributed across a host of educational and workforce development programs. This, combined with the fact that WIOA funding has decreased by more than 40% over the past two decades, has meant that *many programs that could benefit inmates and returning citizens have been consistently underfunded or left to expire*.<sup>20</sup> Local workforce development boards and non-profits, the main recipients of grants tasked with administering reentry services, have consistently cited inadequate funding as the main obstacle towards meeting their performance metrics.<sup>21</sup> The overall stagnation of Pell Grants amidst rising college and education costs has also worked towards weakening the prison higher education system, depriving returning citizens of necessary funds for their post-release educational outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

WIOA's Title 1 and Title 2 authorizes funds for job training and similar services for adult education, literacy and skills training, along with numerous services for underemployed individuals, returning citizens, and disadvantaged youth.<sup>23</sup> These funds are the foundation for the numerous vocational and educational programs offered to prisoners during the duration of their confinement. Once released, the Federal government also plays an essential role as the largest provider of reentry programs.<sup>24</sup>

The US Department of Labor (DOL) runs a number of reentry grant programs including the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) program that is funded under Section 169 of WIOA to provide “transition to reentry initiatives and other post-release services with the goal of reducing recidivism.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to the REO program, DOL also runs a number of pilot programs that provide varying amounts of services designed to support formerly incarcerated individuals with supportive services, financial and housing assistance, and tailored programs to help them secure a foothold in a number of industries.

In sum, a poorly coordinated and inadequately funded set of programs within prisons and across reentry programs results in an overall workforce system that provides insufficient supportive, educational and job training services to genuinely provide returning citizens with a fair second chance at rejoining society and the labor market.

## **The Solution**

There isn't a silver bullet to modernize the prison-based workforce training system—an expansive set of solutions is required. Luckily, Congress has started addressing this issue. Earlier this year, for example, the House of Representatives passed the National Apprenticeship Act, a bill that would support the expansion of the registered apprenticeship model, including for the development of apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs across state prison systems. Let's not stop there. There are several more steps the Federal government can take to create a better designed and well-integrated prison workforce framework with a full range of services for the incarcerated and returning citizens.

### **Increase WIOA funding for prison-based training**

Congress should increase federal funding to modernize the prison-based apprenticeship and skills system. Without adequate funding, lawmakers will miss an indispensable opportunity to reinvigorate the country's workforce system and the different demographics that depend on it, including the nation's men and women behind bars.

Last updated in 2014, WIOA is set for reauthorization this year, providing a key opportunity to reinfuse the workforce system, and by extension, state development boards that provide funding for correctional job training and reentry programs. WIOA funds would also help finance the numerous grant programs administered by DOL, including pilot programs that strive to reimagine the suite of supportive services provided by the federal government for justice-involved youth and adults.

### **Create jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs)**

WIOA authorizes funding for the nation's network of AJCs, which provide job search services, career counseling, and job training programs.<sup>26</sup> Despite providing a valuable service to everyday jobseekers, unemployed individuals, and displaced workers who would otherwise be on their own to navigate the labor market, incarcerated individuals aren't able to access AJCs. While available to them after their release, the absence of coordinated pre-release job-seeking services is a huge disadvantage that plays an outsized role in their dismal economic conditions.

Through increased WIOA funding, Congress can help establish a network of *prison-based* American Job Centers (AJCs) across the country's justice system to better connect inmates with prospective employers. Pilot programs, such as the current reentry projects being implemented, use evidence-based research to test interventions that improve employment outcomes, with a focus on high-poverty, crime-stricken communities across urban and rural areas alike. Enacted in 2015, the Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP) program created jail-based AJCs that aimed to increase inmate's employment readiness for the labor market and to better streamline cooperation between workforce and corrections agencies.

Although the program has since ended, it provided evidence of the feasibility and effectiveness of jail-based AJCs. Since the expiration of the program's funds, 11 of the 20 participating sites planned to maintain the jail-based AJC model they had created, with six sites searching for alternative sources of funding. Overall, the outcomes included greater employment, reduced recidivism, increased earnings, and better opportunities for educational and credential attainment.<sup>27</sup> As a pilot program, the LEAP program offers an example of the kinds of broad-sweeping initiatives the Federal government can enact throughout the prison and workforce system with increased funding. Additional examples that can be scaled include the Bureau of Prisons' "Ready to Work" initiative that seeks to increase connections between employers and recently released workers.<sup>28</sup>

## **Pay inmates a living wage**

The Center for American Progress has proposed that beyond providing inmates with valuable skills and marketable credentials, congressional funding for apprenticeships should be used to pay inmates prevailing wages.<sup>29</sup> A grant dedicated for such a purpose or dedicated funding through apprenticeship block grants would provide the necessary financing for this initiative.

Along with helping them find jobs after their release, paid apprenticeships would provide returning citizens with needed savings as they readjust to their routine lives, along with any financial constraints they may face. For single individuals, they would rely on these payments to navigate their reentry back to their communities, as well as for married individuals and those with children, as their absence while in prison is often a financial burden on their spouses.

The Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP), a limited joint venture between the private sector and prisons and active in over 44 correctional jurisdictions, offers inmates practical jobs that pay at least the federal minimum wage, including allowing deductions for family

support.<sup>30</sup> As a model, it provides legal precedence to the idea of paying incarcerated apprentices prevailing wages and is a testament to the effectiveness of programs that provide inmates with paid, valuable work.

## **Create intermediary agencies**

Congress should create intermediary agencies across all states to both modernize and provide greater coordination across the apprenticeship system, with one focus on modernizing and bolstering the prison-based apprenticeship and skills system. These intermediaries would work with major employers and institutions, alongside prison-based AJCs, to create stronger pathways for employment.

For years, Third Way has called for the creation of workforce intermediaries as a strong step towards strengthening and aligning workforce development strategies across the country. Within the apprenticeship ecosystem, we've called for the creation of Apprenticeship Institutes that can serve as hubs that actively engage players along the workforce pipeline, from workers, employers, and educators to prisons, unions, non-profits, and community partners.<sup>31</sup> A subprogram of those intermediaries could focus on justice-involved individuals, from juveniles and the recently incarcerated to returning citizens.

### **Spotlight: Intermediary Agencies**

Intermediaries have proven to be the connective tissue that bring together everyone in the apprenticeship ecosystem. But to boost their popularity in the United States, they will need adequate—and consistent—funding. To solve that, we propose the creation of state block grants.<sup>32</sup> Under this approach, Congress could guarantee each state a consistent level of annual funding that could be used to create and sustain these entities, including expanding their reach to better support prison-based training models. Block grants would also provide states with the needed flexibility to disburse funds so that they can independently address their unique workforce development goals.

In some states, workforce development boards are best positioned to serve as intermediaries; in others, nonprofits, unions, corporate partnerships, or colleges and educational institutions play a more direct role. Depending on their unique set of needs and strengths, states should be given ample flexibility in the design and implementation of their workforce intermediaries as long as they can ensure quality and equity.

In order to provide that level of flexibility, accountability and quality control will play a key role. States could use benchmarks approved by Congress, DOL, and state governments by which to measure the success of their programs. These performance metrics could include goals to increase equity and diversity, reduce recidivism, target the unemployment rate and

the broader underemployment rate, and numerous other metrics that would help define the state of a healthy and inclusive workforce for all justice-involved individuals and beyond. Similar to bonuses and incentives provided to states for hitting certain benchmarks, Congress could award bonuses to workforce intermediaries or make them eligible to apply.<sup>33</sup>

Among the many benefits these intermediaries would serve for state workforce efforts, they would provide three main benefits to the justice-involved community.

## **1. Establish better pathways between prisons and employers**

Increased congressional funding would help form stronger pathways between prisons and employers. Even inmates who successfully complete pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs still face significant barriers to employment. Upon being released, many must confront a labor market they may not understand with the added social stigma of a criminal record. The success of such programs as LEAP has shown that creating pathways between inmates and employers is among the strongest initiatives that can be undertaken to prepare inmates for success after being released.

## **2. Provide better coordination and quality control**

Without better coordination and quality implementation across the justice system, the prison-based apprenticeship system will continue to suffer from the programmatic inefficiencies that currently hold it back. An expansion of in-demand apprenticeship programs across prisons would help synchronize the prison-based workforce system to labor market needs. Creating shorter programs, and, in the case of pre-apprenticeships, creating more programs that can help transition returning citizens into full-time apprenticeships, would also improve the existing model. State workforce intermediaries can help coordinate these efforts and align them with broader workforce trends. Doing so would not only increase the economic mobility of justice-impacted citizens but would also benefit local and state labor markets by employing a greater share of the population across their communities.

## **3. Expand equity**

There is not enough equity across apprenticeships, the prison system, and the broader workforce population.<sup>34</sup> As the Biden administration seeks to fund the creation of 1 to 2 million new apprentices and bolster the broader workforce system, there must be an equal focus on equity. Whether referring to gender, racial, ethnic, wage or occupational gaps, a lack of equity also exists within the prison complex that sends thousands of disproportionately low-income and minority Americans behind bars and releases them with even lesser prospects than before. Instead of perpetuating these cycles of structural racism and poverty, intermediaries could dedicate their prison-focused programs towards cultivating a genuine and robust vocational and educational training system within prisons.



## Conclusion

As a whole, the size and history of the US incarceration system has led to innumerable consequences across American society. Providing supportive services, increasing economic mobility, and reducing recidivism and the social fallout of having millions of Americans behind bars present serious challenges for policymakers. A stronger prison-based workforce system is one piece of that which would go a long way in increasing economic mobility for the millions of justice-involved citizens across our country. And while they are only one solution along a spectrum of policy options, apprenticeships offer a strong tool to help incarcerated youth and adults gain valuable skills and increase their socioeconomic prospects once released. If the Biden Administration's plan to expand the apprenticeship system to historically unprecedented levels is made a reality, it would be highly beneficial to justice-involved individuals who would capture a greater share of that growth, and in the process, be given a fair second chance.

### TOPICS

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