



# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

## FIVE THINGS ABOUT

# REENTRY



Reentry is the process by which a person in correctional confinement prepares for release and transitions back into the community.<sup>1</sup> We can view reentry processes on a continuum ranging from risk and needs assessment at intake; program, treatment, and educational attainment during incarceration; case planning for release; and post-release supervision and reintegration.

In 2021, state and federal correctional facilities released approximately 443,740 individuals.<sup>2</sup> It's essential to understand how research can inform each stage of the reentry process, increasing the odds that people returning home can successfully and productively remain in their community.

Here is what we know about reentry from decades of research evidence:

### **1. Programs and services should be tailored to the unique needs and risk factors of an individual, to the extent possible.**

Reentry is not one-size-fits-all. A person's pathway into the criminal justice system is unique, as are their needs as they reenter society. An individualized approach to reentry that specifically addresses an individual's criminogenic needs (i.e., factors in an individual's life that are related to their likelihood of recidivating) is key to increasing their chances of success. However, it is often difficult to provide individualized plans given that many jurisdictions do not have the staffing, funding, or ability to support this approach.

Research suggests it is crucial to focus on cognitive and behavioral skills, substance use, mental and physical health, and issues surrounding housing, employment, and family bonds as individuals reintegrate into their communities and families.<sup>3</sup> In fact, family members frequently offer support to loved ones as they reenter,<sup>4</sup> often providing a consistent place of residence after reentry.<sup>5</sup> The consideration of gender differences is also important when addressing individual needs. Men and women face different challenges during the reentry process,

especially regarding child care, housing, employment, and mental health.<sup>6</sup> Gender-responsive programs can help address these unique challenges while capitalizing on some of the characteristics that make people more amenable to rehabilitation.<sup>7</sup>

### **2. Support services should be holistic in nature.**

It's critical to consider the whole person when preparing individuals for reintegration into the community and address their needs to promote a successful return. Attending to an individual's specific criminogenic needs is important because it can improve specific outcomes, such as mental and physical well-being, stable housing, and gainful employment. But addressing one issue at the expense of others may not yield the intended impact. Individuals rarely return with only one need. This population is typically high risk and high need, requiring a comprehensive and holistic approach to reentry.

Research shows that to promote successful reentry, a program or service should be delivered at the right time for the individual.<sup>8</sup> Take, for example, an individual exiting prison in search of employment. Providing employment support

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alone ignores their need for stable housing or treatment for an underlying substance use disorder. Attending to those needs makes the prospect of keeping that job far more likely.

### 3. Cognitive behavioral therapy benefits all facets of reentry-preparation and post-release programs.

The research is clear — programs that include a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) component are effective in supporting successful reentry. CBT can help people discover and change the thought processes behind past and current negative behaviors.<sup>9</sup> It can restore self-esteem, impart tools and strategies for making more positive life choices, and help clients improve their decision making, social skills, moral reasoning, self-control, and impulse management. It is effective for both juveniles and adults as well as those who have had issues with substance use or violence.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the effects of CBT programs are strongest for those with the highest risk of recidivating.<sup>11</sup>

Criminal justice agencies must think carefully about the time needed for effective treatment, which is generally five to 20 sessions.<sup>12</sup> To increase success, CBT could be combined with employment opportunities so that individuals receive constant and consistent treatment. Treatment could be administered through a mobile app or group class settings that provide the opportunity to role-play real-life situations that individuals may encounter.

### 4. Community supervision works best when it includes robust support functions.

Matching supervision style and the frequency and intensity of programming with a person's criminogenic risk and needs helps promote positive reentry and reduces recidivism. For example, lower risk individuals should not be subjected to overly stringent surveillance and supervision requirements because this may exacerbate recidivism.<sup>13</sup> An over-emphasis on technical violations and arrests for minor crimes may hide improvements the individual is making toward addressing criminogenic needs. Further, when individuals under community supervision perceive their interactions with supervision officers as fair, they are less likely to engage in criminal behavior or violate their conditions of supervision.<sup>14</sup>

Cultivating a positive and supportive relationship between clients and community corrections officers also improves reentry outcomes and has been shown to positively affect subsequent criminal justice involvement.<sup>15</sup> The organizational coaching model is one practice that may help build and foster this relationship.<sup>16</sup> A probation officer-as-coach wants to help their "players" become more successful in life and "win" by complying with supervision conditions. A coach wants to effect behavioral change in their players, and they seek to help them improve based on their players' talents. Taken together, surveillance and support are key.

### 5. We must employ more nuanced measures of recidivism that present the individual as a whole.

Rearrest is considered the most common and observable measure of recidivism across the justice system, yet it is a relatively poor indicator of how an individual is faring in their post-release experience. It is not a credible measure of culpability owing to lack of due process, and the risk of arrest can vary by community and personal demographics. We must move beyond rearrest and redefine how we measure success. This does not negate the importance of examining when and if an individual reengages in criminal activity after they are released from custody — it is an important data point. However, it is only one

in a diverse number of measures that should be assessed. Just as reentry is a process, success should be measured on a continuum.

A recent report on recidivism published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine states, "A sense of hope, efficacy, and overall well-being is of fundamental importance for successful reentry after prison. The challenge is to develop and validate measures of personal well-being that are both reliable and sufficiently flexible to encompass the diverse experiences, backgrounds, and identities of those leaving prison."<sup>17</sup> We may identify more reentry successes if we shift our orientation to the likelihood of success instead of the likelihood of failure or recidivism.

If the goal of reentry is to aid individuals in their successful reintegration into society while also advancing public safety, then the best metrics would be those that reveal how well the returning citizens are doing, both mentally and physically, as well as how they are contributing meaningfully to their communities and establishing strong, healthy relationships. Measures of civic and community engagement, self-control, and other pro-social activity would be useful. These markers of well-being are not as easily quantifiable or as easy to collect because they often rely on self-reported rather than administrative data, but they are no less important measures of the ways in which those leaving incarceration may be improving — or where they may need additional supports.<sup>18</sup>

### Director La Vigne Highlights Evidence-Based Strategies for Successful Reentry

Listen here: <https://nij.ojp.gov/multimedia/director-la-vigne-discusses-evidence-based-strategies-successful-reentry>.

### Need Help?

National Reentry Resource Center at <https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/>.

### Endnotes

1. Reentry is a term coined by former director of the National Institute of Justice Jeremy Travis. Correctional confinement includes [jails](#), which are facilities generally operated under the authority of a sheriff, police chief, or county or city administrator where individuals are awaiting trial, arraignment, or some other sentencing disposition or are serving a short sentence (typically less than one year), and [prisons](#), which are institutional facilities operated by a state or the federal government where people are already sentenced and are serving longer terms of confinement (typically more than one year).
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