
Mentoring Ex-Prisoners in the Ready4Work Reentry Initiative

By Wendy S. McClanahan

With 650,000 prisoners being released from incarceration each year, the question of how to support their return—and promote a successful transition into society—is paramount. What strategies will help ex-prisoners reconnect to their communities, get jobs and stay out of jail? Can mentoring, a proven approach in youth programming, also impact the trajectories of returning prisoners?

Early findings from the Ready4Work prisoner reentry initiative suggest that, as part of a comprehensive reentry program, mentoring is indeed a valuable strategy.

Ready4Work participants who met with a mentor:

- Remained in the program longer;
- Were twice as likely to obtain a job; and
- Were more likely to stay employed than participants who did not meet with a mentor.¹

These findings are discussed below and are explored in depth in a forthcoming report from Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), authored by Wendy S. McClanahan, Shawn Bauldry, Danijela Korom-Djakovic and Jennifer McMaken.

Background

Men and women returning from incarceration are concentrated in some of the nation's poorest neighborhoods, where there are few supports and services to help them reintegrate effectively, and where their presence may threaten already fragile households and communities. Many of them have trouble adjusting to life on the outside. Studies have shown that nearly two thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years, and half are reincarcerated. The resulting cycle of incarceration and recidivism takes a destructive human and

financial toll, not just on prisoners themselves, but on families, communities and the nation.

P/PV's Ready4Work initiative was launched in 2003 with support from the US Departments of Labor and Justice and the Annie E. Casey and Ford foundations. Ready4Work programs were established in 17 sites around the country to provide a comprehensive set of services to returning prisoners. The basic model included employment services, case management and—somewhat uniquely—mentoring.

For years, P/PV has studied and evaluated a wide variety of mentoring programs for youth. Our research and that of others have demonstrated that carefully structured, well-run mentoring programs can have concrete benefits for young people, including improving school attitudes and performance; strengthening peer and parent relationships; and decreasing delinquent behaviors, such as fighting, truancy and substance use.² Research has also shown how mentoring works—through the development of a trusting relationship between the young person and the mentor, who provides consistent, nonjudgmental support and guidance.³

Based on this previous work, P/PV suspected that mentoring might also accrue benefits for returning prisoners. After all, mentors could provide ex-prisoners with both emotional support and practical advice, helping them navigate everyday barriers like transportation or housing; it could also reinforce other program areas—by, for instance, supporting efforts to find a job or seek drug rehabilitation treatment.

A mentoring component was thus built into the Ready4Work program model, and we set about collecting data that could help us gauge the potential of this new approach.

How Did the Mentoring Programs Take Shape?

Because little research about mentoring adults exists, P/PV allowed the 11 adult Ready4Work sites⁴ to decide whether to emphasize group sessions, one-to-one mentoring or a combination, letting each lead agency pick the model that provided the best fit for its program structure. We expected that each approach would have strengths and weaknesses. While one-to-one mentoring might foster deeper, more meaningful relationships and provide stronger support, there is the risk that adults might find the idea of a mentor, usually a relationship reserved for youth, demeaning. Also, one-to-one mentoring requires intensive efforts to recruit large numbers of mentors, which can tax the capacity of smaller programs. Group mentoring, in contrast, might hold more appeal for adults and requires fewer mentors, but it's possible that the resulting relationships and support might not be as strong.

While we allowed for some flexibility in designing the mentoring component, we also required sites to follow certain guidelines in creating and managing their programs, based on best practices from the youth mentoring field. For instance, mentors were encouraged to spend at least four hours a month in face-to-face contact with participants and to commit to the program for at least a year. Sites were required to implement careful screening mechanisms and to provide robust training for mentors—both components that had proved critical in the youth mentoring programs we'd studied.

In other ways, mentoring adult ex-prisoners in Ready4Work followed a different pattern from traditional youth mentoring. The participants did not always meet with mentors weekly or attend group sessions every month, as many youth programs require. Adult ex-prisoners face numerous competing demands on their time. This posed a challenge for scheduling mentoring sessions at Ready4Work sites. In addition, Ready4Work participants seemed to feel a certain amount of ambivalence about having a mentor—in fact, some sites dispensed with the term altogether, adopting “life coach” as an alternative they felt would be more appealing to an adult population.

In the end, about half of Ready4Work participants met with a mentor. These participants spent an average of

just three months in mentoring. Of those who participated for more than one month, each spent an average of 3.5 hours per month with their mentor.

Who Volunteered to Become a Mentor?

The Ready4Work sites recruited a diverse group of volunteers. The ages ranged from 18 to 80, with an average age of 45. Almost 60 percent were male, more than 85 percent were African American, and half were African American men—this is important because, for many mentoring programs, it has been difficult to recruit large numbers of African American males as mentors. As we've noted in previous work on faith-based mentoring programs, the success with recruiting this population probably stems from drawing on African American congregations as a primary source of volunteers. Pastors in these congregations seem to be quite effective in encouraging their parishioners to step forward (particularly male parishioners).⁵

What Outcomes Were Associated with Mentoring?

In examining the relationship between mentoring and other outcomes in Ready4Work, an important point must be made: Mentoring was just one component of the Ready4Work model; virtually all of the participants received case management and employment services.⁶

Thus our research doesn't explore the value of mentoring by itself, but rather its potential as part of a larger program.

As noted above, about half of participants received mentoring, permitting P/PV to compare the experiences and outcomes of participants who were mentored with those who were not. **Ready4Work participants who met with a mentor at least once had stronger outcomes in a number of areas:**

- They remained in the program longer (10.2 months versus 7.2 months);
- They were 60 percent less likely to leave the program the following month;
- They were *twice as likely to obtain a job*.⁷ And after the first encounter, an additional month of meetings increased the likelihood of finding a job by 53 percent.

In addition:

- Meeting with a mentor increased a participant's odds of getting a job the next month by 73 percent over ex-prisoners not taking advantage of mentoring.⁸ We also found that an additional month of meetings increased a participant's odds of finding a job by another 7 percent.
- Participants who met with a mentor were 56 percent more likely to remain employed for three months than those who did not. An additional month of meetings with a mentor increased the odds of remaining employed three months by 24 percent.

While intriguing, these findings must be interpreted cautiously. Ready4Work participants were not randomly assigned to mentoring—meaning the motivation that drove them to seek mentoring might also have affected their other outcomes (for instance, it might have led them to remain active in the program longer or to try harder to find and keep a job). We were able to only partially address this problem through statistical adjustments. More rigorous research is needed to determine with certainty if mentoring improves ex-prisoners' outcomes.

The findings outlined in this brief will be published and discussed in much greater depth in a forthcoming report on the mentoring component of Ready4Work. We are also developing a manual to help organizations interested in launching their own mentoring programs for ex-prisoners.

Conclusion

In sum, our early work indicates that mentoring offers a promising approach to supporting recently released prisoners. The findings described here are preliminary, but encouraging—and certainly sufficiently strong to warrant further study.

There are many, many important questions that still need to be answered about mentoring ex-prisoners. What would such programs ideally look like? What structures and practices support effective programs? Which ex-prisoners are likely to benefit most?

It must also be noted that mentoring isn't easy, either as a programmatic task or a personal commitment. For any mentoring program, there is the continuing challenge of finding enough individuals prepared to dedicate the time and energy to building a relationship, and matching them with the right mentee. When that

“mentee” is an adult returning from incarceration, finding suitable and willing volunteers—and keeping them—can be very difficult.

The challenges should not deter progress, however. Promoting successful reentry for ex-prisoners is a critical issue facing individuals, families, communities and governments across the country. In Ready4Work, mentoring emerged as a promising approach to help former prisoners readjust to society. Of course, mentoring alone is not enough. Programs need to address the full range of needs, from housing to health care and employment, of newly released prisoners. However, relationships—dependable, supportive relationships—should be considered a core component of any reentry strategy.

For more information on Ready4Work, or P/PV's past research on mentoring, please visit www.ppv.org.

Endnotes

- 1 There are important caveats to consider when interpreting these results. Ready4Work participants were not randomly assigned to mentoring, meaning the motivation that drove them to seek mentoring might also have affected their other outcomes. We were able to only partially address this problem through statistical adjustments. Therefore, while we find these outcomes promising, further research is needed to truly understand the relationship between mentoring and outcomes in reentry programs.
- 2 Tierney, Joseph P., and Jean Baldwin Grossman, with Nancy Resch, *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*, Public/Private Ventures, 1995.
- 3 Sipe, Cynthia L., *Mentoring: A Synthesis of P/PV's Research: 1988-1995*, Public/Private Ventures, September 1996.
- 4 In addition, there were seven Juvenile Ready4Work sites, which also incorporated mentoring into their programs; however, Juvenile Ready4Work is being evaluated by researchers separately. The findings in this report are from adult Ready4Work sites only.
- 5 Bauldry, Shawn and Tracey A. Hartman, *The Promise and Challenge of Mentoring High-Risk Youth: Findings from the National Faith-Based Initiative*, Public/Private Ventures, March 2004. Also: Jucovy, Linda, *Amachi: Mentoring Children of Prisoners in Philadelphia*, Public/Private Ventures, June 2003.
- 6 Because of this lack of variation, we were unable to include these other services in our models in order to isolate the effect of mentoring.
- 7 These statistics exclude the 508 mentoring participants who found a job before their first meeting.
- 8 By measuring employment only in the month after a mentoring session, we were forced to exclude all participants who found a job in the first month, 22 percent. Our data were not detailed enough to determine if participants met with a mentor before obtaining a job in a given month.

PPV Preview

P/PV is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives.

Public/Private Ventures

2000 Market Street, Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103

Tel: (215) 557-4400

Fax: (215) 557-4469

Editor

Chelsea Farley,
*Vice President for
Communications*

Design

Malish & Pagonis

New York Office

The Chanin Building
122 East 42nd Street, 42nd Floor
New York, NY 10168

Tel: (212) 822-2400

Fax: (212) 949-0439

California Office

Lake Merritt Plaza, Suite 1550
1999 Harrison Street
Oakland, CA 94612

Tel: (510) 273-4600

Fax: (510) 273-4619

www.ppv.org



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Public/Private Ventures
2000 Market Street, Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103