

# Strengthening Community Connections

## Evaluating the Impact of Mentoring for Individuals Transitioning from Jail to Community

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There is wide range of challenges individuals face when re-entering the community from incarceration. Some of the biggest challenges include finding housing, finding and retaining employment, and handling issues with substance-use disorder.<sup>1</sup> Over the past two decades, jurisdictions throughout the country have implemented new models to help address the multifaceted and complex issues individuals encounter after release and, in doing so, reduce the chances that those individuals end up back behind bars.

Programming and case management support, combined with connections to community resources, have been the underpinning of most reentry improvement efforts. A prime example of this approach is the Individualized Correction Achievement Network (I-CAN), operated by the Fortune Society in partnership with the New York City Department of Corrections. I-CAN is the largest discharge planning program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and woman in New York City. Launched in 2013 and funded through the federal Second Chance Act, I-CAN serves about 6,400 people per year with programming for individuals who are at moderate to high risk of reoffending.

Often, however, individuals returning to the community confront obstacles that are beyond the scope of a case manager's referral. Recognizing these needs, in 2016, the Fortune Society launched a mentorship program to provide additional, personalized support for a group of I-CAN participants.

The Mentoring Program was built into the framework of the I-CAN program. Prior to release, program participants were paired with a mentor, who provided one-on-one coaching and support, starting in the jail and continuing during the first crucial months following the individual's return to the community. Throughout the transition process, mentors provided personalized guidance and assistance with navigating available services, modeling pro-social communication and relationship-building skills, and acting as an advocate for the individual's success with the courts, service providers, and others in the community.

To assess the impact of this added layer of reentry support, the Fortune Society partnered with Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA). The evaluation included an implementation study, as well as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the impact of the program on participant outcomes relative to a control group.

## Study Findings

**Adding mentoring to existing reentry services had a positive impact on increasing post-release service uptake among I-CAN participants.** The average number of post-release contacts with non-mentoring Fortune staff by program participants exceeded those of the control group by two to one.

**The study was unable to demonstrate improved employment, housing, and substance use outcomes among participants compared to the control group.** Based on available self-reported employment, housing, and substance use data at six months following release for the treatment and control group, there were promising results in all three areas, but the differences between the treatment and control group were not statistically significant and were not necessarily representative of outcomes among all study participants given the high level of missing data.

To learn more about PPA's work on criminal and juvenile justice, contact Robb Burroughs at 517-485-4477 or [rburroughs@publicpolicy.com](mailto:rburroughs@publicpolicy.com).



“When I was struggling with getting back on my feet, my mentor was someone outside of my family that I could talk to, someone that was always available and wouldn't judge me or put me down.”

— I-CAN Mentoring Program Participant



**The program met the target for reduced recidivism, but did not demonstrate an improved rate beyond that already achieved by the existing I-CAN services.** Overall, 67 percent of mentoring program participants were not rearrested within 12 months following release from jail, exceeding the program’s proposed goal of 65 percent. However, the analysis indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups for likelihood of future arrest or, for those who were arrested, time to arrest.

## Lessons

Considering the well-documented challenges involved with engaging incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in services and keeping them engaged,<sup>2</sup> the achievements of the I-CAN Mentoring Program provide valuable insight into successful strategies for increasing service participation among a hard-to-serve population. Some of those successful strategies include:

- Employ mentors that represent a diverse mix of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, including individuals who have prior involvement with the justice system, substance abuse recovery, or other lived experience to build connections with mentees.
- Focus on eliminating barriers. For instance, the program provided free transportation back to the community on the day of release and assisted individuals with acquiring cellular telephones.
- Design services to be flexible to the needs of program participants. Mentors made concerted efforts to meet mentees at times and places that worked best for the mentees.

The implementation study findings suggest that the efforts to find solutions and adapt service-delivery strategies resulted in increased frequency of mentoring contacts among the later cohorts of program participants.

However, the shifts in program processes may have also made it more difficult to detect the effects of the program using an RCT. Although the RCT is considered the gold standard for establishing causal evidence of an intervention’s impact, this study highlights some of the challenges of conducting an RCT during the early stages of a new program’s implementation. An RCT is able to provide the strongest evidence when the intervention to be studied is well defined and remains more or less constant throughout the study period. As demonstrated by the mentoring program, though, effective implementation of new and innovative interventions often requires an iterative process of designing, testing, assessing, and adjusting the intervention’s parameters and processes. In other words, many of the elements necessary during the early stages of implementation to support development of a high-quality service-deliver model are the same elements that weaken the power of an RCT to demonstrate program effects.

## Implications

PPA has identified the following questions and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners as they seek to increasing public safety by enhancing success among individuals returning from incarceration back to the community:

## Key Questions to Consider

- How can mentoring programs take advantage of increased service engagement among mentees to achieve

improved intermediate and long-term outcomes?

- What data sources can a program access to measure important intermediate outcomes for returning citizens (e.g., housing, employment, health)? What partnerships are necessary to gain access to those data?

What level of evaluation is best for a program’s stage of development? Will the program elements be held constant for the duration or might some fine-tuning be needed during implementation?

## Suggested Practices and Policies

*Develop and maintain community partnerships.* To address the unique needs individuals encounter after release, programs should seek opportunities to partner with a variety of community entities. Partners bring critical resources for addressing immediate needs, as well as providing an opportunity to educate the public about the challenges of reentry and remove some of the stigma of incarceration that often inhibits successful rehabilitation.

*Extend timeframes for establishing programs and testing impact.* Although it would slow the process of testing and demonstrating an intervention’s effectiveness, new interventions may need additional time to refine their service-delivery models prior to undertaking rigorous experimental studies of impact.

*Continue to document processes and results.* To grow the evidence base for mentoring incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, evaluation should remain a key component of future program efforts so that other practitioners can learn from those efforts and apply that learning to other contexts.

<sup>1</sup> Amy L. Solomon et al., *Life After Lockup; Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Beth Angell et al., “Engagement Processes in Model Programs for Community Reentry from Prison for People with Serious Mental Illness”, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 37(5), Sep-Oct 2014, 490 – 500; Amy L. Solomon et al., *Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry; Research Findings from the Urban Institute’s Prisoner Reentry Portfolio* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2006).