Impact Evaluation Brief

Leah Shiferaw, Christian Geckeler, Jonah Deutsch, Brett Fischer, Anne Paprocki, Ivette Gutierrez, Lea Folsom, Andrew Wiegand, Gina Lewis, and Brittany English

Summary of Findings from the Reentry Project Grants Evaluation

Summary

The Reentry Project (RP) grants were designed to improve labor market and criminal justice system outcomes for people with prior involvement in the justice system.

U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Mathematica and Social Policy Research Associates in September 2017 to conduct an evaluation of the RP grant program, which included an implementation study and an impact study.

The impact study estimated the impacts RP participation had on employment, earnings, and criminal justice system involvement. It did so by comparing the outcomes of RP program participants to a comparison group of people with prior criminal justice involvement who received light-touch employment services from the Wagner-Peyser program. Outcomes were measured between 2020 and 2023, a time heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it difficult for many grantees to reach their enrollment goals and may have affected the outcomes of RP participants as well as the comparison group.

Key findings

Compared to the matched comparison group:

- RP participants were 5.1 percentage points more likely to have a new criminal conviction in the 10 quarters after program entry.

- RP Participants were 4.1 percentage points less likely to be employed in the 9th and 10th quarters after enrollment.

- RP participants earned $2,244 in the 9th and 10th quarters after enrollment, $693 less than the average comparison group member during that period. ◢

The Reentry Project Grants

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded almost $250 million in Reentry Project (RP) grants to 116 grantees between 2017 and 2019. These grants represented one investment in a series of DOL grant initiatives designed to help people with involvement in the justice system (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. U.S. Department of Labor grant initiatives supporting reentry programming from 2010 to 2022

2022
• PROWD
• Growth Opportunities

2020
• Pathway Home
• Young Adult Reentry Partnership (YARP)

2017
Reentry Project (RP)

2016
Reentry Demonstration Project for Young Adult

2015
• Job ChalleNGe
• LEAP

2014
Face Forward Intermediary and Community

2013
• Face Forward Serving Juvenile Offenders
• Training to Work

2012
Serving Adult and Youth Ex-Offenders through Strategies Targeted to Characteristics Common to Female Ex-Offenders

2011
Reintegration of Ex-Offenders

2010
Young Adult Offenders and High School Dropouts in High-Poverty, High Crime Communities

Source: U.S. Department of Labor (2022).
LEAP = Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release; PROWD = Partners for Reentry Opportunities in Workforce Development.

RP grantees

RP grantees included 91 community-based organizations (CBOs) and 25 intermediary organizations located in high-crime, high-poverty communities across the United States (Exhibit 2). Each intermediary organization received grants ranging from roughly $4 million to $4.5 million and CBOs received grants ranging from roughly half a million to $1.5 million. In addition to applying as either a CBO or intermediary grantee, applicants were required to select one of two focal populations: (1) adults age 25 or older who were incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system and released from prison or jail within 180 days or (2) young adults ages 18 to 24 who were involved in the juvenile or adult justice system. (In the latter population, up to 10 percent of participants could have been those who dropped out of high school without criminal justice involvement.) Grants to both CBOs and intermediary organizations lasted 36 to 39 months. The grants included a three-month planning period, a 24-month operational period, and a nine- to 12-month follow-up period. The 2018 and 2019 grantees – the primary focus of both the implementation and impact studies – enrolled 17,361 RP participants (9,098 adult participants and 8,263 young adult participants). The impact study included a subset of these grantees located in six states – Alabama, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania – because agencies in these states were willing and able to share necessary outcomes data.

**Exhibit 2.** Locations of 2017–2019 Reentry Project grant programs
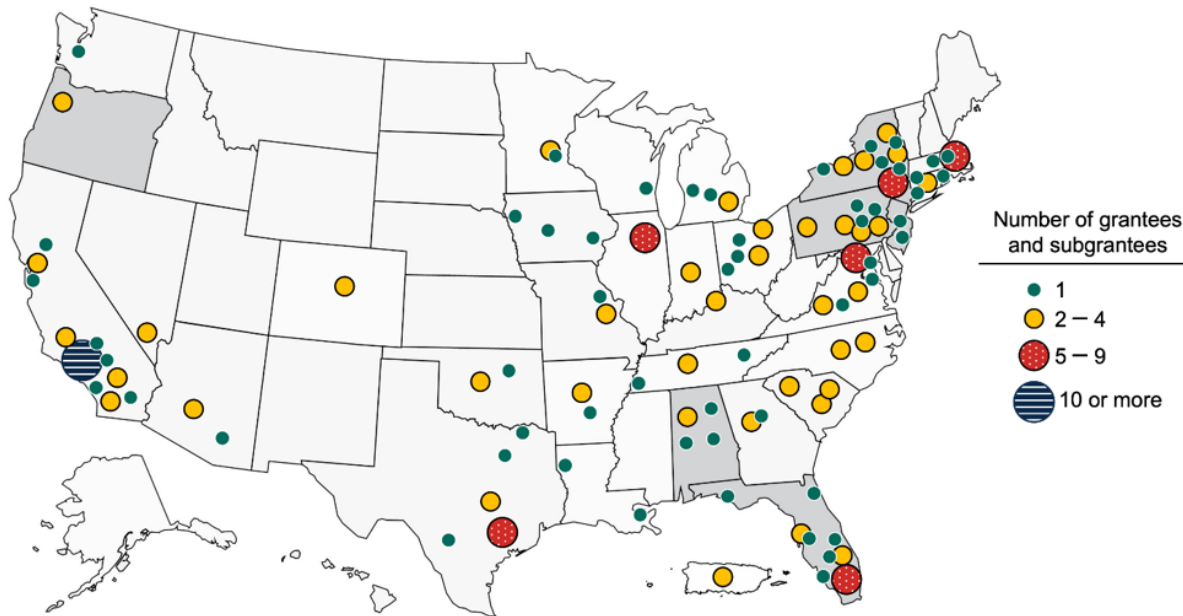
Note: States shaded in darker grey were included in the Reentry Project impact study.

Recruiting and enrolling participants

Grantees recruited participants in various ways, including referrals from criminal justice system partners, events in the community, or through word of mouth or recommendations from friends or family members. After determining whether applicants met the eligibility criteria for RP, grantees used multiple screening strategies to assess their commitment and fit for programming. These strategies included requiring interviews with program staff, the completion of application forms, and criminal record reviews (Exhibit 3). The 2018 and 2019 grantees experienced challenges with enrollment and service provision due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, only 63% of 2018 grantees and 49% of 2019 grantees met 100% of their enrollment target.

Exhibit 3. Typical sequence for linking potential participants to Reentry Project services
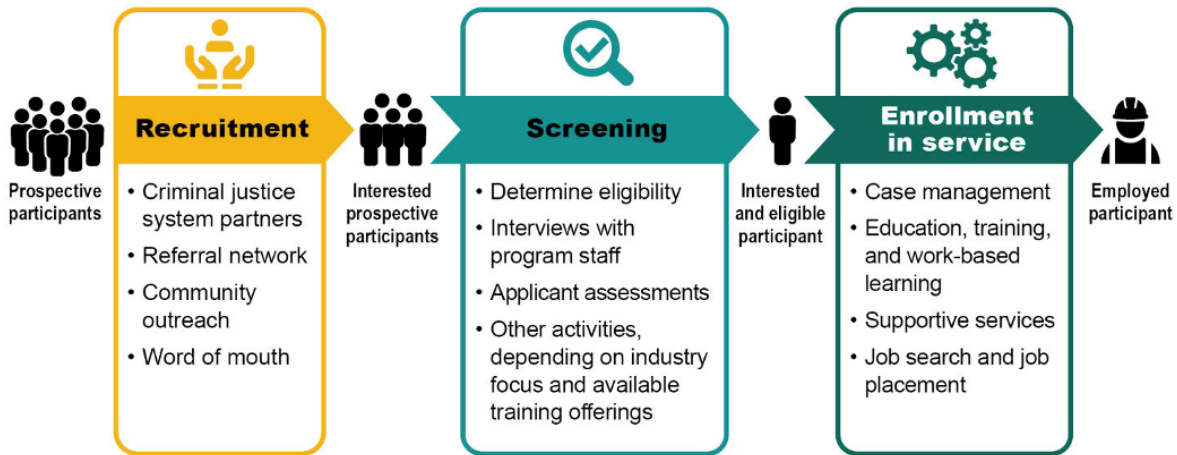
Source: Virtual site visits (n=27).

Characteristics of RP participants

The impact study's population of interest consists of RP participants who enrolled between 2018 and 2019. The impact study is limited to the 3,090 participants in the six states for which we could obtain employment, earnings, and criminal justice data on both RP participants and comparison group members. The study team collected employment and earnings data from state workforce agencies and criminal justice data, including arrest, conviction, and prison incarceration data from state justice agencies for the periods before and after participants' enrollment into the RP program. The impact study RP participants were diverse in terms of their demographic backgrounds (Exhibit 4). About 63 percent of participants were ages 18 to 29 at enrollment, 21 percent were ages 30 to 39, and 15 percent were ages 40 or older. About 21 percent of the participants self-identified as female. Twenty percent of participants identified as White, 73 percent identified as Black, and 6 percent were of another racial background. Fourteen percent identified as Hispanic, while 86 percent identified as non-Hispanic.

Exhibit 4. Characteristics of Reentry Project participants at program entry

Sample Size **3,090**

AGES (YEARS)

18 to 24 years	49%
20 to 29 years	14%
30 to 39 years	21%
40 to 49 years	9%
50 to 59 years	5%
60 years and older	1%

GENDER

Female	21%
Male	79%

EDUCATION LEVEL

No HS completion	35%
HS equivalent	26%
HS graduate	34%
Any postsecondary	5%

RACE / ETHNICITY

White	20%
Black	73%
Other/Multiracial	6%
Hispanic	14%
Non-Hispanic	86%

HS = High School

Program services

RP grantees offered participants a range of services focused on helping them enter employment, including career preparation activities, employment-focused services, and case management. As part of their programs, all RP grantees were required to provide at least one of the following employment strategies: registered apprenticeships, paid work-based learning (WBL), and career pathways. Although RP grantees needed to provide some common offerings, the services provided to RP participants often varied based on the grant period and the grantees' focal group.

Nearly all grantees (97 percent of grantees surveyed) offered case management services using a dedicated RP case manager. RP programs employed, on average, 2.5 case managers. Case managers played a central role in delivering RP services by communicating with participants, providing ongoing support, and encouraging their success. While this communication varied from grantee to grantee, many case managers reached out to RP participants at least monthly or as frequently as weekly. Case managers helped participants determine their goals, interests, and steps for achieving their goals, often encouraged them to participate in services, and provided extra support when they encountered roadblocks.

Despite the central role case management played in grantees' service offerings, most described challenges maintaining participant engagement, addressing participant needs, and navigating the

COVID-19 pandemic. Eighty-three percent of surveyed grantees said that engaging and retaining participants was somewhat or very challenging. Program staff noted that they could not meet basic needs for some participants or keep them motivated and engaged, especially when competing with the short-term labor market opportunities that were available to participants.

RP grantees offered training to participants, but available training offerings and the extent to which participants enrolled in and completed training varied. Data from the Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS)[1] offer insights on the training RP participants engaged in through the grants. A large portion of RP participants received education or training services (72 percent), but grantees did not all provide training to the same number of their participants (Exhibit 5). Occupational skills training was the most common type of training received (43 percent). According to site visit data, the most common occupational skills trainings offered were access to industry-recognized credentials, such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certifications, forklift certificates, and certified nursing assistant credentials.

Grantees offered WBL experiences, but a low percentage of participants received them. As identified through the grantee survey, RP grantees most frequently offered WBL through apprenticeships (82 percent) and on-the-job training (59 percent). Across these grantees, the types of WBL opportunities and their length varied, from light-touch job shadowing to more intensive apprenticeships.

Exhibit 5. Percentage of 2018 and 2019 Reentry Project participants receiving training

Reentry Project participants receiving training	Share of 2018 and 2019 Reentry Project grantees
100 percent	9%
90–99 percent	16%
75–89 percent	17%
50–74 percent	33%
49 percent and below	25%

Source: Workforce Integrated Performance System data, July 1, 2018–December 31, 2021 (n= 81 grantees).

Note: One grantee has missing WIPS data.

Despite the high percentage of grantees offering WBL, the actual percentage of participants who received these services was much lower. For example, according to WIPS data, only 1.3 percent of participants received registered apprenticeship programming, and only 2.3 percent of participants received on-the-job training. The COVID-19 pandemic affected sites' abilities to offer education, training, and WBL opportunities to their participants. Grantees reported closures of training facilities and difficulties maintaining connections with employer partners or training providers. In some instances, employers were no longer willing to accept anyone for WBL who was not already on their personnel roster.

RP grantees also identified challenges providing or connecting participants to education and training opportunities. Over half of surveyed grantees (54 percent) reported some challenges providing or giving participants access to high-quality education-related activities. Respondents from 14 of the 27 sites visited noted that the length of educational programs often discouraged participants from completing them. According to the site visit respondents, participants' financial constraints exacerbated this problem, as they needed to earn money while enrolled in classes.

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[1] RP grantees were just beginning to use the WIPS for data collection during the time period of interest for this study, which may have affected the quality of service receipt data available in the WIPS. WIPS grantee reporting requirements and systems were updated at the end of fiscal year 2022. All WIPS data for this evaluation were collected prior to this change being implemented.

After receiving career readiness support, education, and job training services, RP staff helped participants search for job opportunities, connected participants with employers and jobs, and helped participants keep or retain jobs once hired.

Effectiveness of the RP grants

RP grants were intended to improve the workforce and criminal justice outcomes for people previously involved with the justice system. To understand whether the RP grants program achieved its goals, the impact study compared RP participants to a matched comparison group of people with similar characteristics and prior criminal justice involvement who received light-touch employment services through the Wagner-Peyser program. These services may include evaluating job seeker's their skills, assisting job seekers with basic job search, providing job postings, and or and determining whether they are eligible for other employment programs (for a full description of the Wagner-Peyser program, see Shiferaw et al. 2024). This section presents the key results of the impact study.

Exhibit 6. Impact of Reentry Project grants on recidivism, employment, and earnings outcomes
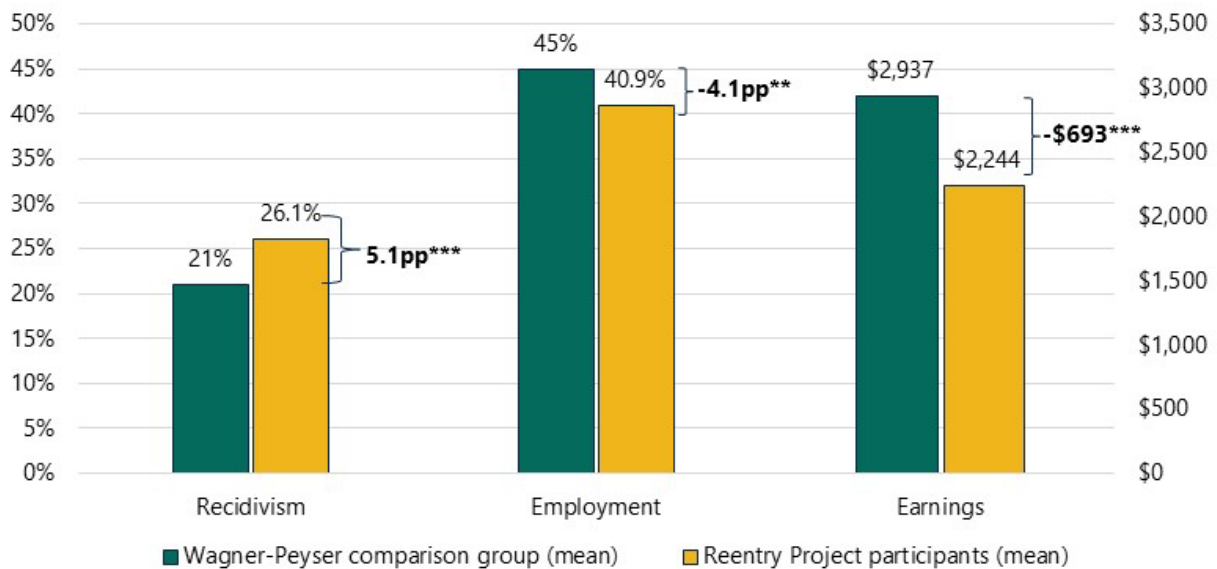
Source: National Directory of New Hires data and state administrative court records matched to Workforce Integrated Performance System data. Sample includes data from 2018–2023.

Note: Employment is defined as having any earnings in a given quarter. Estimates are based on a total sample size of 1,198 Reentry Project participants and 16,032 Wagner-Peyser participants. Wagner-Peyser group means are unadjusted. Reentry Project group means are adjusted means equal to the Wagner-Peyser group mean plus the estimated impact. For a detailed description of estimation methods, see Shiferaw et al. (2024).

** p-value < 0.05.

*** p-value < 0.01.

pp = percentage points.

Criminal recidivism. RP participants were more likely than those in the comparison group to have a new criminal conviction after program enrollment (Exhibit 6). The likelihood of a new criminal conviction in the 10 quarters after program entry was 5.1 percentage points higher.

Employment. RP participants were less likely to be employed than comparison group members, with a 4.1 percentage point difference between these groups in the 9th and 10th quarters after program enrollment (Exhibit 6). Although the study did not find significant differences among adult participants, youth participants were 7.3 percentage points less likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group.

Earnings. Impacts on post-enrollment earnings were also negative. Overall, RP participants earned $693 less in the 9th and 10th quarters after enrollment compared to members in the comparison group, who earned $2,937 on average during that period (Exhibit 6).

It is important to note that, due to limitations in data availability, efforts to construct a truly comparable matched comparison group might have been impaired. We made efforts to match RP participants to Wagner-Peyser participants based on available data, such as their demographic backgrounds and prior criminal justice records, and used a "doubly-robust" impact estimation approach to control for the same pre-program information that we used for matching. However, differences between the two groups might have existed that we could not account for, due to missing key details of prior criminal justice involvement – such as sentencing and incarceration – and pre-program earnings. As such, patterns in impacts may reflect unobserved differences between RP participants and matched comparison group members. In addition, these results may not generalize to all RP participants. Due to state restrictions on access to workforce and criminal justice data, we could only collect data on program and comparison group members from six states: Alabama, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. For a full discussion and presentation of these limitations, see Shiferaw et al. (2024). ◢

The Reentry Project Impact Study

The Reentry Project (RP) impact study compared the criminal convictions, employment, and earnings of program participants to a group of people with similar characteristics who received light-touch employment services through the Wagner-Peyser program. The matched comparison group had similar observed levels of prior involvement with the criminal justice system and other key background characteristics as RP participants. The study used data from the U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce Integrated Performance System and from state criminal justice agencies to construct this matched group of Wagner-Peyser participants. For a full description of the data, comparison group design, and analyses, see Shiferaw et al. (2024).

How Impacts Varied Across RP Participants

To further understand how our estimated impacts varied across RP participants, we conducted a series of subgroup analyses to understand if the grantee type or a participant's race, ethnicity, or gender influenced the outcomes they experienced. These exercises served two goals. First, they shed light on which policy-relevant subgroups exhibited particularly large differences in labor market and criminal justice outcomes between RP and Wagner-Peyser participants. Second, by estimating impacts among subgroups for which we believe we could construct relatively high-quality matches, we could examine the consequences of missing data for our primary results.

Severity of prior criminal justice involvement. By design, RP served people with relatively serious criminal justice backgrounds, particularly compared to Wagner-Peyser, which does not explicitly provide reentry services and enrolls many people who have no history of criminal behavior. This disconnect in eligibility criteria prompted us to match program and comparison group members along a range of

observable measures of prior justice involvement. However, data limitations prevented us from observing and matching on prior sentencing or incarceration, key determinants of RP eligibility.

To assess how these missing data might have affected our results, we estimated impacts separately among RP and Wagner-Peyser participants with relatively severe prior justice involvement (who faced an elevated likelihood of incarceration and recidivism). Overall, we found small and insignificant impacts among groups with more serious prior justice involvement. That is, when we focused on RP and Wagner-Peyser participants with the greatest likelihood of pre-program incarceration or supervised probation, and the highest risk of post-program recidivism, we found relatively small differences (less than two percentage points) between our program and comparison groups. For example, for RP and Wagner-Peyser participants who faced a felony charge, differences between our program and comparison groups in post-program recidivism were small and not statistically significant (Exhibit 7).

These findings support the conclusion that, when we narrowed our attention to these subgroups with more serious justice involvement, we may have improved our match quality, reducing the baseline differences in earnings prospects and the likelihood of recidivism between our program and comparison groups.

Exhibit 7. Impact of Reentry Project on recidivism by severity of prior justice involvement
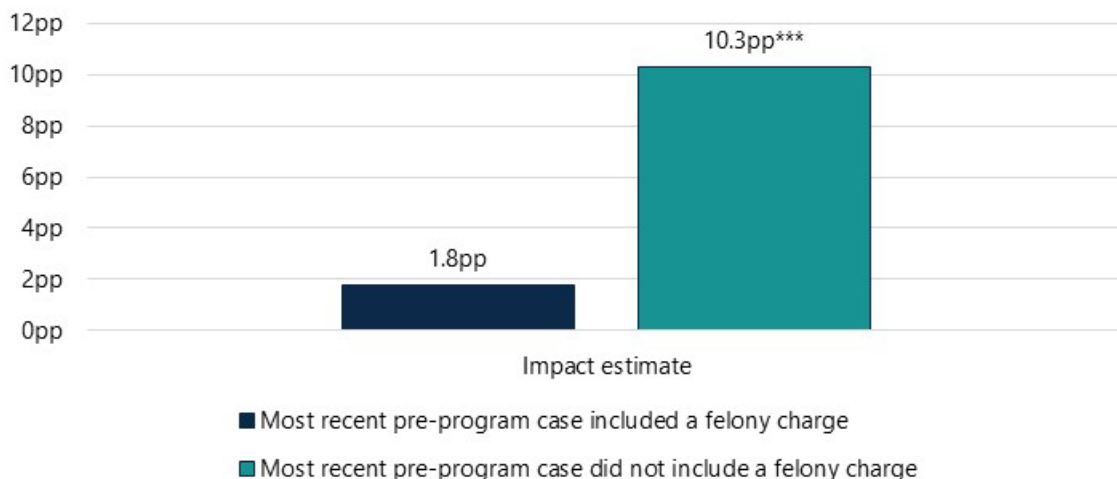
Source: National Directory of New Hires data and state administrative court records matched to Workforce Integrated Performance System data. Sample includes data from 2018–2023.

Note: The sample includes all Reentry Project participants, both adults and young adults. Based on data for 732 RP participants with a felony charge and 466 with no felony charge.

** p-value < 0.05.

*** p-value < 0.01.

pp = percentage points.

Race and ethnicity. Black program participants showed larger differences in recidivism and employment than other races and ethnicities. For instance, Black program participants were more likely to face a new criminal conviction (6.7 percent) and less likely to be employed (5.9 percent) relative to Black comparison group members. Hispanic program participants were no more or less likely to face a new criminal conviction relative to Hispanic comparison group members, and their average earnings were less than

those of their comparison group counterparts after enrollment. We found no statistically significant impact for White program participants.

Gender. Female participants made up only 17 percent of RP participants and exhibited significantly higher recidivism rates (16.1 percent) than female comparison group members. Male RP participants, however, were less likely to be employed (5.4 percent) after the program than men in the comparison group. Both male and female RP participants had lower earnings than members of the comparison group, although the estimated difference was not statistically significant for female participants.

Program grantee type. RP grantees carried out their reentry services with varying degrees of consistency and intensity. For instance, intermediary grantees—which enrolled a little more than half (56 percent) of participants—generally adopted a uniform service delivery approach, whereas CBO grantees created more localized case management models (Geckeler et al. 2023). Despite these differences in service delivery, participants from one type of grantee did not fare systematically better: RP participants from intermediary grantees showed much larger gaps in recidivism than those from CBOs (8.8 percentage points versus 0.2 percentage points) but smaller gaps in post-program earnings ($578 lower earnings versus $947 lower earnings).

Type of service received. RP participants varied in the number of service hours they received, and one might expect that participants who received more intensive services (or more service hours) might have experienced more favorable post-program outcomes. However, there were no differences based on intensity of services in either direction. We did not find evidence that RP participants who received more intensive services had more or less favorable estimated impacts.

Enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grantees were operating at different grant phases, meaning some grantees were in early stages of operation while others were concluding operations when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. Note that some 2018 and 2019 RP grantees received no cost extensions due to the COVID-19 pandemic that enabled them to continue enrolling participants through fall 2022 and 2023. Findings did not show any differences in impacts across participants who enrolled before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although only a small number of RP participants in the impact study enrolled during the pandemic (n = 291), we observed almost all participants' outcomes during the pandemic (2020–2023), which might have limited differences in outcomes across these groups.

Lessons from the RP Grant Evaluation

The impact study demonstrates that people in the RP program group performed worse than Wagner-Peyser comparison group members. We offer two interpretations of these findings, where either or both could have driven the findings.

First, the RP grant programs studied may have had negative impacts on RP participants' rates of criminal recidivism, employment, and earnings, as compared to Wagner-Peyser participants. Past research has found a mix of effects in reentry employment programming, as synthesized in Lacoe and Betesh (2019). However, at least two studies on similarly structured reentry programs have reported unfavorable impacts on recidivism (Wiegand and Sussell 2016; D'Amico and Kim 2018).

A second interpretation is that, due to data limitations, our matching approach may have led us to compare RP participants and Wagner-Peyser participants with observably similar, but in reality, very distinct employment and prior criminal justice backgrounds. We are missing granular sentencing, incarceration, and probation records and pre-program employment and earnings information and thus

cannot be certain of their comparability. An analysis of variation in impact estimates by severity of observed prior justice involvement, discussed earlier in this brief, supports this hypothesis.

Where do we go from here?

The RP grants represent DOL's continued commitment to supporting people with prior justice involvement through employment-related services. The findings from the impact study demonstrate the challenges organizations may encounter when building and implementing programs that help such populations achieve labor market success.

Interpreting the results of the RP grant evaluation requires understanding the study's limitations. Our findings reflect only six states, which we selected due to the number of RP grantees and participants in each state and the state's willingness to participate in the study. In addition, within these states and grantees, the RP participants included in the impact study were those with suitable pre-program and outcome data for whom we could find a matched comparison group member with similar observed characteristics. Thus, these results are not necessarily generalizable to other RP grantees or participants, or other reentry programs with similar programming.

With the caveats discussed in this brief, the results from this impact study provide several implications for policy and future research. Existing evidence on employment-focused reentry programs has reinforced the importance of intensive employment and training services paired with wraparound supports for improving labor market and recidivism outcomes for populations with prior justice involvement (Lacoe and Betesh 2019; Wiegand and Sussell 2016). These program components are central to the program logic model for the RP grants, but the implementation study suggested that participants did not receive these services as intended. These findings suggest that there would be benefits to focusing programming and policy to address program implementation challenges experienced by grantees. This would help to ensure they are able to offer the intended program model and participants receive those services. To evaluate the impact of the intended program components, future research should consider assessing implementation fidelity before beginning an impact study, using comprehensive measures of service receipt to test that the program model is being implemented as intended before evaluating it.

The potential sources of bias in our impact estimates are unique to a matched comparison design. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) could address these potential sources of bias because treatment and comparison groups would both be formed from people eligible for the program and be identical on both observable and unobservable characteristics. However, RCTs are infeasible in many contexts. We explored the possibility of conducting an RCT for the RP grant evaluation but ultimately concluded such a design was not feasible because grantees would not attract sufficient applicants to allow us to randomize some to the control condition (there were not more applicants interested in the program than the number of open spaces, also called oversubscription). Complementary approaches, such as piloting enhanced services, may allow for a randomized design in settings without oversubscription, but would answer different research questions. Given the challenges in implementing an RCT design, running an RCT successfully may require compensation and support for grantees to participate in such studies and to develop program plans from the outset that accommodate random assignment. Fortunately, DOL is continuing to support programs that have the potential to provide more robust services and more rigorous evaluations as part of its current research into the Pathway Home grant program and PROWD.

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Full reports:

Geckeler, Christian, Leah Cadena-Igdalsky, Ivette Gutierrez, Madeleine Levin, Sergio Martinez, Jessica Muñoz, Anne Paprocki, Maureen Sarver, Brittany English, Armando Yañez, and Jeanne Bellotti. "Implementing Employment Programs to Support Reentry: Lessons from the Reentry Project Grants." Report submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2022.

Shiferaw, Leah, Jonah Deutsch, Brett Fischer, Christian Geckeler, Anne Paprocki, Lea Folsom, Andrew Wiegand, Gina Lewis, Brittany English. "Employment Programs to Support Reentry: Findings from the Reentry Project Grant Evaluation." Report submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor. Washington, DC. Mathematica, 2024.

Both reports available at: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation.