



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL  
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TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO ORA

## **Evidence Brief**

# **Pre-release prisoner work readiness programmes**

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**Disclaimer**

The views and interpretations in this report are those of the researchers and are not the official position of the Ministry of Social Development.

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# Evidence Brief: Pre-release prisoner work readiness programmes

## Objective

The purpose of this brief is to assess whether programmes with a pre-release employment based component<sup>1</sup> improve employment, training and recidivism outcomes for released prisoners.

## Prisoner Reintegration Service Enhancements 2011/2012<sup>2</sup>

Prisoner Reintegration Teams (PRTs) consist of Work and Income case managers and work brokers who assist prisoners to find employment and apply for financial assistance upon release. As part of the pilot for Prisoner Reintegration service enhancements, PRTs work with Department of Corrections staff and prisoners<sup>3</sup> for up to eight weeks before release. PRT assistance includes:

- identifying low-, medium- and high-risk factors for employment reintegration
- completing a Jobs4U profile
- providing information on suitable training and employment opportunities
- obtaining relevant documentation, bank accounts and accommodation
- completing Steps to Freedom<sup>4</sup> forms.

## Evidence from similar pre-release programmes

Only a few evaluations of programmes that featured a pre-release employment component and reported on benefit receipt, employment or training outcomes were found<sup>5</sup>. Many of these programmes provided more extensive services outside of the scope of the PRT (such as prison industries, assistance with gaining qualifications while incarcerated, or intensive non-employment-related services).

Two United States programmes were drawn on for this evidence brief. Project RIO was considered to be comparable to the Prisoner Reintegration service enhancements. Findings from the Prisoner Re-Integration Initiative (PRI) are also reported on, as the evaluation of this initiative cited outcomes relating to both pre-release and work readiness services (though not work readiness services provided prior to release). These two programmes are described below:

### Project RIO

Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders) is a Texas-based programme designed to reduce recidivism through employment. Participation in the programme is voluntary. Services are provided to participants pre- and post-release and include:

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to the Prisoner Reintegration service enhancements, 2011/2012

<sup>2</sup> Pilot for Prisoner Reintegration Service Enhancements: Terms of Reference (2011)

<sup>3</sup> Prisoners must be sentenced to more than 28 days, and must not be sex offenders or on remand.

<sup>4</sup> Steps to Freedom is a re-establishment Special Needs grant (up to \$350) and covers costs such as rent in advance, bond, clothing, connecting utilities.

<sup>5</sup> Literature was sourced via websites and reference libraries of published reports.

- developing an individualised treatment plan to identify a career path and guide placement decisions (education, training or employment programmes)
- a comprehensive assessment pre-release to assess the needs of the prisoner
- workshops that prepare prisoners to find employment. Topics include preparing a resume, completing a job application, and mock job interviews
- assistance with acquiring documents necessary for employment
- encouraging employers to hire ex-prisoners by providing tax incentives for hiring ex-offenders and Fidelity Bonds (to insure against theft by ex-offender employees).

A study of Project RIO in 1992 (with a sample size of 6,500), found that one year after release<sup>6</sup>:

- 69 percent of participants found employment compared to 36 percent of a comparison group of non-RIO parolees
- Project RIO participants spent more time in work than non-participants
- participants who were employed showed reduced recidivism rates even when previous convictions, age, risk and ethnicity were taken into consideration
- participants considered to have a high risk of reoffending were less likely to be arrested (48 percent) and less likely to be incarcerated (23 percent) compared with high risk non-participants (57 percent and 38 percent, respectively). These differences were statistically significant.<sup>7</sup>

### **Prisoner Re-entry Initiative (PRI)**

The PRI<sup>8</sup> is a United States federal programme launched in 2005. The Department of Justice provided grants to corrections departments across the US for pre-release services for PRI participants. The Department of Labour awarded grants to faith-based and community organisations for employment-centred services aimed at released prisoners. Prisoners convicted for violent sex-related offending were excluded.

An evaluation in 2009<sup>9</sup> (with a sample size of 13,315) focused on post-release services but did report some findings relating to pre-release, as well as work readiness services.

- 45 percent of PRI participants received some form of pre-release service (such as assessments, education, mentoring, life-skills training, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and work readiness services)
  - 37 percent of those who received pre-release services (15 percent of all PRI participants) received services relating to improving work readiness
  - statistical analysis found no significant relationship between having received some form of pre-release service and employment or recidivism outcomes
- 90 percent of PRI participants received work readiness services at some stage (pre- or post-release). Participants who received work readiness services at any stage were:

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<sup>6</sup> Menon, Blakely, Carmichael and Silver (1992) (as cited in Webster et al, 2001)

<sup>7</sup> Menon, Blakely, Carmichael and Silver (1992) (as cited in MacKenzie & Hickman, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> PRI is now known as "Reintegration of Ex-Offenders - Adult Program (RExO)"

<sup>9</sup> Grady & Coffey (2009)

- more likely to be placed in employment (68 percent) compared to those who did not receive this service (53 percent)
- less likely to be re-arrested for a new crime (7.5 percent) compared to those who did not receive this service (8.7 percent)
- less likely to be re-incarcerated for a technical violation of parole (8.2 percent) compared to those who did not receive this service (11.3 percent).

## Summary

The aim of this brief was to investigate whether ex-prisoners who participate in pre-release work based programmes have improved employment, training, and recidivism outcomes. Only two evaluations of programmes with pre-release work readiness components which reported on released prisoner outcomes were identified.

A year after participating in Project RIO, released prisoners were more likely to find employment, spend more time in work, and less likely to be arrested or incarcerated than non-participants (particularly when comparing “high risk” ex-prisoners). Project RIO differs from the New Zealand’s Prisoner Reintegration service enhancements in a number of ways, including providing tax incentives and Fidelity Bonds to employers. Also, as participation was voluntary, participants may differ from non-participants, for example, by having higher motivation. These differences may have a direct effect on improving rates of employment (and subsequently reduce recidivism).

Participants in the PRI who received any form of pre-release services showed no significant difference in employment or recidivism outcomes compared to those who did not receive pre-release services. However, participants who received work readiness specific services either before or after release were more likely to be placed in employment, less likely to be arrested for a new crime and were less likely to be re-incarcerated for a technical violation of parole.

The limited evidence available suggests that pre-release work-based programmes may improve employment and reduce recidivism. However, as these programmes differ substantially from the Prisoner Reintegration service enhancements and since participation in these programmes is voluntary it is not possible to definitively describe the extent to which pre-release work-based services impact on the outcomes of released prisoners.

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