

Unable to get jobs, freed inmates returning to jail

Recidivism rate likely to rise as jobless rate for ex-cons may be 60 percent

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A growing number of states are pushing inmates out of prison in early release programs designed to reduce overcrowding and save money. But faced with a tight job market and few employers willing to hire someone with a criminal record, many former inmates are likely to end up right back behind bars.

Last month, California began releasing prisoners deemed at low risk for re-offending. Colorado, Oregon, Kentucky and Connecticut, all wracked with budgetary issues, have instituted similar moves as a way to cut costs, while others, including Michigan and Mississippi, are considering similar initiatives.

“If people get drawn back into the real world, get a job and make a living, studies show they’ll be less likely to go back to prison,” said Howard Husock, vice president for policy research for The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. “With early release now on the menu for so many states, it makes the matter more pressing.”

The cost of housing, feeding and providing medical care for America's prison population has surged over the past two decades, from \$11 billion a year to more than \$50 billion, as states passed tough laws that put more offenders behind bars.

By the end of 2008, more than 7.3 million people were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole — about one in every 31 U.S. adults, compared with one in every 77 adults in 1982, according to [a 2009 report](#) from the Pew Center on the States.

About 700,000 inmates are released from state and federal prison each year. Of those released, about two-thirds re-offend within three years, said Husock.

Lack of job opportunities

Despite being offered a taste of freedom, some inmates released early under state programs are already returning to prison.

Of the first 10 inmates in Colorado's early release program, which began in October, three are back behind bars, according to Katherine Sanguinetti, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Corrections.

Sanguinetti would not comment on if any of the 10 former inmates were able to secure employment, but prison advocates in the state point to a tough employment picture for all former

inmates, not just those being released early.

“A lot of people are hitting a very poor economy,” said Carol Peebles, re-entry coordinator for the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition in Denver. Even in a good economy, “over half go back to jail in three years. The lack of employment plays a big part in this.”

With national unemployment hovering just under 10 percent, former inmates are competing for jobs with those who never served time behind bars. Although the U.S. Department of Labor does not track the unemployment rate for former offenders, experts estimate the jobless rate for individuals with a prison record is from 40 percent to 60 percent.

Take Johnathan Barker, who was released from a Colorado prison last June, and can't find the one thing he needs to keep him from going right back: a full-time, good-paying job.

Barker, 34, lives in a halfway house in Denver and has applied for about 60 openings. Even with his extensive background as an apartment manager before he was incarcerated on a drug-dealing conviction, he was only able to land a part-time telemarketing job paying \$7.28 an hour. “It's not enough to pay the bills,” he said. “I'm constantly in a hole, and I could end up back in jail.”

Randall Countryman, 40, of Chula Vista, Calif., echoes Barker's concerns. He was released from prison in May after serving 21 years for attempted murder and armed robbery.

He's working on getting his bachelor's degree in business and maintaining a 4.0 GPA. But after applying for 90 positions, he was able to land only a five-week temporary job with a printing company.

“People want to hire the best they can get right now,” he said. “Someone with a felony conviction is not best you can get.”

‘The back of the line’

To avoid the likelihood of returning to jail within the first year, ex-convicts need to land jobs within two months of their release and they need to make more than minimum wage, said Nancy La Vigne, director of the Justice Policy Center at The Urban Institute in Washington.

Prison reform advocates said the biggest barrier to helping former inmates find jobs is getting employers to accept someone with a black mark on their record among their employee ranks.

“Many still say ‘no’ to hiring people because they have a conviction,” said Glenn Martin, director for policy for New York-based prisoner re-entry nonprofit The Fortune Society. That's despite the fact that legislation in at least eight states, including some of the toughest in New York and Hawaii, is supposed to protect ex-cons from employment discrimination by private employers. For government jobs, 17 states have laws on the book protecting the rights of former offenders.

“Our folks are always at the back of line when it comes to employment, and that line has gotten longer,” Martin said.

Some employers do want to help.

James Andrews owns a hot dog shop in Chicago called Felony Franks, where he employs mainly

former inmates to run the operations. “They are entitled to work. Would you rather them working or on a corner dealing with drugs?” he asked.

Ex-cons, many lacking even a high school diploma, often face a number of biases from employers, said B. Diane Williams, executive director for the Safer Foundation.

Williams believes what’s needed are more groups like Safer, which helps released prisoners re-enter society, to bridge the chasm between hiring managers and former offenders. Instead of hiring ex-cons directly, “employers are more willing to work with intermediaries,” either through community-based or state or local government programs, she said.

Alicia Beacham, who has been in and out of jail and most recently was released last year, said Safer has helped her enroll in school to get her GED and has provided assistance with writing her resume and setting up job interviews.

“I’m working now in a factory, and even though it’s not high-paying, I appreciate having the chance,” said Beacham, 42, who makes \$8 an hour with no benefits.

More needs to be done to prepare inmates for the world outside, beyond just \$200 and a bus ticket, said Jody Lewen, executive director for the Prison University Project at San Quentin, Calif.

“The state, the Department of Corrections, have never done much of anything for people leaving prison as it relates to employment, and with the economy as bad as it is, it’s a catastrophic situation,” she said. “They do little things to hook people up with jobs, or provide job training, but relative to the number of people involved, they are statistically negligible.”

Tremendous challenges

Despite the difficulties inmates may face when they come out, most prisoner advocates still believe releasing low-risk prisoners early is a good idea.

“Yes, there are people who will get so overwhelmed with not being able to get a job, that they will actually choose to go back” to prison, said Tina Yankee, who runs Turnabout Inc., a Denver-based nonprofit that helps released prisoners get jobs. “But keeping people locked up because the economy stinks is not workable in my eyes.”

Some states that have instituted early release programs have encountered resistance, primarily over concerns about public safety. In Illinois, the governor ended a short-lived early release program in December because so many inmates were ending up back in jail. And Oregon’s legislators last week began moving a bill through the state Capitol that would suspend an early release law passed last summer, which critics said has led to the release of some violent offenders.

Of the 6,500 California prisoners targeted for release this year, many were involved in prison job-training programs or passed a high school equivalency exam, according to Gordon Hinkle, a spokesman for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

“Some offenders, no matter what you do, will get out and succeed and go on with their life. Some offenders need assistance, and some will be recidivists no matter what you do,” said Scott

Kernan, undersecretary of operations at the California corrections department. “We focus on those that are going to make it.”

A steady paycheck

It’s impossible to know how successful or unsuccessful any of these state initiatives to release inmates early will be or whether they’re really end up saving money.

But history may not bode well for them.

Malcolm Young, an attorney and adjunct professor at Bluhm Legal Clinic, Northwestern University School of Law, pointed out that in the mid-1980s during the severe recession, Texas released many inmates early. “They came back in such numbers that the initial decrease in population turned into an increase,” he said.

Preparing and training inmates in vocational jobs for emerging industries, such as green technologies, should be a focus, Young said. He pointed to a program at Chicago’s Sheridan prison that has shown success training prisoners in the trades for construction work.

Another program showing signs of success is the Prisoner Re-entry Initiative in Newark, N.J., which focuses on getting ex-inmates working in transitional jobs within six months of their release.

The initiative gets state and federal funding, and it includes an eight-week “Clean and Green” program that gets ex-offenders doing things like landscaping and paving, and building job skills like showing up to work every morning on time, said Ingrid Johnson, who runs the program.

“Not everyone is ready for workforce. They need to be trained not only in job skills, but basic employability issues,” she said.

Keith Williams, who left jail in July, went through the Clean and Green program, and feels it got him on the right track.

Williams, 43, is up for a full-time job with a construction company and is hopeful he’ll be made an offer soon.

“It very important to have a job so you got a steady paycheck coming and you keep your mind focused on doing what’s right,” he said. “I’m staying out of jail. I’m not going back.”