

Executive Summary

A SUCCESSFUL PRISONER REENTRY PROGRAM EXPANDS

Lessons from the Replication of
the Center for Employment Opportunities

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OVERVIEW

This report presents results from a fidelity assessment and implementation analysis of five Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) replication programs in New York, California, and Oklahoma. Between 2004 and 2010, MDRC conducted a rigorous random assignment evaluation of the original CEO program as part of the Enhanced Services for the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The evaluation found that CEO was effective at reducing recidivism rates — the rates at which participants committed new crimes or were reincarcerated — among important subgroups of its participant population. Based in part on these findings, the CEO program was selected by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in 2011 to be part of its Social Innovation Fund and receive funding and technical assistance to expand and replicate the model in various locations across the United States.

Based in New York City, CEO is one of the nation's largest transitional jobs programs for former prisoners. The program offers participants temporary, paid jobs, along with employment counseling and other services, all aimed at making them more employable and preventing their return to prison. The current study describes how the model was replicated in other locations, assesses its implementation in various contexts, and reports on findings from a qualitative study of participants' perceptions of and experiences in the CEO program. The findings presented in this report focus on the implementation of CEO's core elements at the replication sites and provide a description of participants' experience with the program. One additional goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of which aspects of the CEO model may have contributed to the reductions in recidivism found in the initial evaluation of the New York City program.

This report's findings include the following:

- Overall, the replication programs operated with high fidelity to the original program model.
- Participants in replication programs engaged in CEO activities at similar rates as did participants in New York City, although replication programs did a better job of moving participants through the model's early stages and into working with the staff to obtain unsubsidized employment.
- Participants said that the program's most essential and distinctive elements were its structure and the support of its staff members.
- While CEO work crews offered some opportunities for skills training, they functioned primarily as jobs, with the habits and competencies that make for a good employee emphasized through the routine of reporting for work each day, cooperating with colleagues, and following supervisors' directions.

PREFACE

Although the nation's prison population has declined slightly in the recent past, the United States continues to lead the world in incarceration. Former prisoners face a range of challenges to successful reentry into the community, and rates of recidivism — the rates at which they commit new crimes or are reincarcerated — are high. Recidivism imposes huge social and fiscal costs on families, communities, and taxpayers. In this context, there is a pressing need to identify effective models for making the reentry process more successful.

Studies have shown a correlation between higher employment and lower recidivism. Employment can help pave the way to better housing conditions and help ex-prisoners forge better relationships with their families and communities. However, it is difficult to find a job after serving a prison sentence. Many formerly incarcerated individuals find it difficult to break into the workforce because they have limited school and work histories, which make them less appealing to potential employers. Reentry initiatives in recent years have sought to address that lack of work history. Transitional jobs give formerly incarcerated individuals both recent work experience and a source of legitimate income in the critical months following their release, and help participants build basic work skills and behaviors before they seek jobs in the regular labor market. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), based in New York City, is one of the nation's largest and most highly regarded transitional jobs programs.

Between 2004 and 2010, MDRC conducted a rigorous random assignment evaluation of the New York City CEO program. The three-year evaluation showed large increases in employment during the first year of follow-up, while participants had their transitional jobs. Those impacts faded the longer participants were out of the program, but significant reductions in recidivism persisted despite the fading effect on employment. It is likely that this recidivism effect resulted in part from the structure and employment participants received from CEO after their release from prison. Based on these findings, CEO and MDRC worked together to strengthen CEO's job placement component, to improve its ability to help participants make the transition to unsubsidized employment.

This report describes the implementation of five CEO replication programs in New York State, California, and Oklahoma. Sponsored by the Social Innovation Fund, the study evaluates replication programs' fidelity to the original CEO model and supplements the evidence from the earlier evaluation of CEO with a more in-depth look at participants' experiences. It is hoped that this research will provide criminal justice researchers and practitioners with evidence they can use to improve transitional jobs programs for returning prisoners.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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This report is based on work supported by the Social Innovation Fund, a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The Social Innovation Fund combines public and private resources with the goal of increasing the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the United States. We particularly thank Gabriel Rhodes and Bob Granger from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Social Innovation Fund for their support throughout the project.

For their help in scheduling site visits and participating in several interviews on-site and in the months following site visits, we thank Dave Covey in Albany, NY, Jeff Conrad in Buffalo, NY, Anisa Mendizabel in Rochester, NY, Keiara Auzenne in San Diego, CA, and Kelly Doyle in Tulsa, OK. This report would not have been possible without their cooperation and the cooperation of their staff members. We also thank Bill Heiser at the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) for talking through the ways replication programs were established in California and elsewhere, and Mick Munoz for welcoming MDRC staff members to the New York City program on several occasions and setting up introductions and interviews with staff members and participants throughout the evaluation. We are also indebted to Terry Salo and her colleagues at the Department of Criminal Justice Statistics for offering critical background information on the criminal justice and reentry context in New York State. Finally, we are especially thankful to Sam Schaeffer at CEO for his contribution to this report and his consultations throughout the research and report-drafting process.

We would also like to extend a particular thanks to all of the CEO participants who spoke with MDRC staff members and shared their stories and perspectives during site visits and in interviews over the course of the study. Their willingness to speak openly about their lives, goals, challenges, and successes made this report immeasurably richer than it otherwise could have been.

At MDRC, we are grateful to many people's valuable contributions to this project. David Butler played a large role in conducting site visits and helping with the design and analysis of the study. We thank Bret Barden, Brian Bayes, Shirley James, and Sally Dai for processing and analyzing the baseline and participation data presented in this report and Melanie Skemer for her hard work developing staff and participant questionnaire materials and analyzing questionnaire results. Mifta Chowdhury assisted in the administration of participant and staff questionnaires and Janaé Bonsu coordinated the production of the report. We are also very grateful to the people who reviewed this report and advised us on it: Dan Bloom, Rob Ivry, and John Hutchins. Lastly, we would like to thank MDRC's publications staff. Joshua Malbin edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), based in New York City, is one of the nation's largest transitional jobs programs for former prisoners. The program offers participants temporary, paid jobs, along with employment counseling and other services aimed at making them more employable and preventing their return to prison. Between 2004 and 2010, MDRC conducted a rigorous random assignment evaluation of the program as part of the Enhanced Services for the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The evaluation found that CEO was effective at reducing recidivism rates — the rates at which participants committed new crimes or were reincarcerated — among important subgroups of its participant population. Based in part on these findings, the CEO program was expanded to several additional cities around the country with financial assistance from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund.

This report presents results from a fidelity assessment and implementation analysis of five CEO replication programs in New York, California, and Oklahoma. The findings presented here focus on how the replication programs implemented CEO's core elements and provide a description of participants' experience. One additional goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of which aspects of the CEO model may have contributed to the recidivism reductions found in the initial evaluation of the New York City program.

BACKGROUND ON CEO AND RESEARCH ON EMPLOYMENT AND RECIDIVISM

Over the past three decades, incarceration has increased dramatically in the United States. Although the prison population has leveled off or declined in recent years, the proportion of Americans who are involved in the criminal justice system (in prison or jail or under probation or parole supervision) remains far above the rate that prevailed for most of the 20th century.¹ Former prisoners face a range of challenges in reentering the community, and rates of recidivism remain high. Within three

1. Nathan James, *The Federal Prison Population Buildup: Overview, Policy Changes, Issues, and Options* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014). Jails are locally operated, short-term facilities used to detain people who are awaiting trial and those who are serving sentences of less than one year. Prisons are long-term facilities run by the state or the federal government that typically hold felons and inmates with sentences of more than one year. Probation and parole are both forms of community supervision. Probation typically occurs as an alternative to incarceration in jail or prison, but it can also be built into a sentence to follow a period of incarceration. Parole refers to a period of supervision following an early release from prison. In both cases, supervision entails a range of rules and reporting requirements, the violation of which can result in a variety of penalties.

years of being released, two-thirds of former prisoners are arrested again and half return to prison.² Such high recidivism takes a serious toll on families and communities and imposes high costs on taxpayers. There is a pressing need to identify effective models for reintegrating former prisoners into society, lowering recidivism rates, and establishing paths to self-sufficiency.

Various studies have shown a correlation between higher employment and lower recidivism.³ For people returning from prison, employment can help pave the way to better housing and improved relationships within their families and communities. Unfortunately, it is a major challenge for former prisoners to find a steady job upon release. In addition to the stigma of a criminal record, most people returning from prison also have other attributes — such as limited school and work histories — that make them less appealing to potential employers.⁴ When they are able to secure work, many have competing demands on their time from drug-treatment programs, curfews, or other restrictions on mobility that can make it harder to keep a full-time job.

MDRC's previous studies on the New York City CEO program found mixed results: The program proved cost-effective and led to significant reductions in recidivism, but did not lead to long-term employment gains. Nonetheless, the impacts on recidivism were impressive (particularly given the difficulty other transitional jobs programs serving the formerly incarcerated had in achieving the same result), and raised questions about what aspects of CEO may have been driving the effect.⁵ This report aims to build on that understanding by offering more detail on the CEO model and the experiences of participants who went through the program.

THE CEO MODEL

CEO's model is based on the assumption that people recently released from prison have an immediate need for stable income and employment. Although there is some variation from one program to the next, in every location the core services are the same: participants are provided with a basic job-readiness and life-skills class for one week and then are quickly placed in temporary jobs in small work crews performing structured tasks, for which they receive a daily paycheck. Participants work three to four days on the work crews and spend the fifth day in the CEO office, meeting with

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2. Matthew R. Durose, Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014).
 3. See, for example, Christopher Uggen, "Work As A Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2000): 529-546; David B. Wilson, Catherine A. Gallagher, and Doris MacKenzie, "A Meta-Analysis of Corrections-Based Education, Vocation, and Work Programs for Adult Offenders," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 37, 4 (2000): 347-368; Edward J. Latessa, "Why Work Is Important, and How to Improve the Effectiveness of Correctional Reentry Programs that Target Employment," *Criminology and Public Policy* 11, 1 (2012): 87-91.
 4. Harry J. Holzer, Steven Raphael, and Michael A. Stoll, "Employment Barriers Facing Ex-Offenders," Reentry Roundtable Discussion Paper (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003); Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology* 108, 5 (2003): 937-975.
 5. Cindy Redcross, Dan Bloom, and Erin Jacobs (MDRC); Alford A. Young, Jr., and Kristin Seefeldt (Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy); and Michelle Manno, Sara Muller-Ravett, Jennifer Yahner, and Janine Zweig (Urban Institute), *Work After Prison: One-Year Findings from the Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2010).

job coaches or job developers who help participants obtain unsubsidized jobs in the private sector. (The role of a CEO job coach is to work with new participants and those who are not considered “job-start ready,” helping them get ready to search and interview for unsubsidized positions while in transitional jobs. Job developers focus on moving participants into permanent employment by working with both outside employers and participants.)

Participants’ daily performance on work crews is evaluated by work-site supervisors through the use of a “Passport to Success,” which participants can show to potential employers when they apply for jobs. Bonus payments called “Rapid Rewards” are offered to former participants as incentives to stick with jobs they obtain after going through the CEO program.

Figure ES.1 illustrates the model’s conceptual framework, showing the components of the intervention and how those components are intended to lead — through stability, positive peer and staff influences, short-term employment, and work-readiness training — to long-term improvements in employment and reduced recidivism. Specifically, the program’s intervention of daily paid work along with job-search assistance, interview preparation, and training in workplace expectations is expected to improve participants’ stability, incomes, and job readiness. The thinking is that these short-term changes during the critical period immediately following release from prison will ultimately lead to longer-term employment gains, improved attitudes and behaviors, and reductions in recidivism.

REPLICATING CEO AND ASSESSING FIDELITY

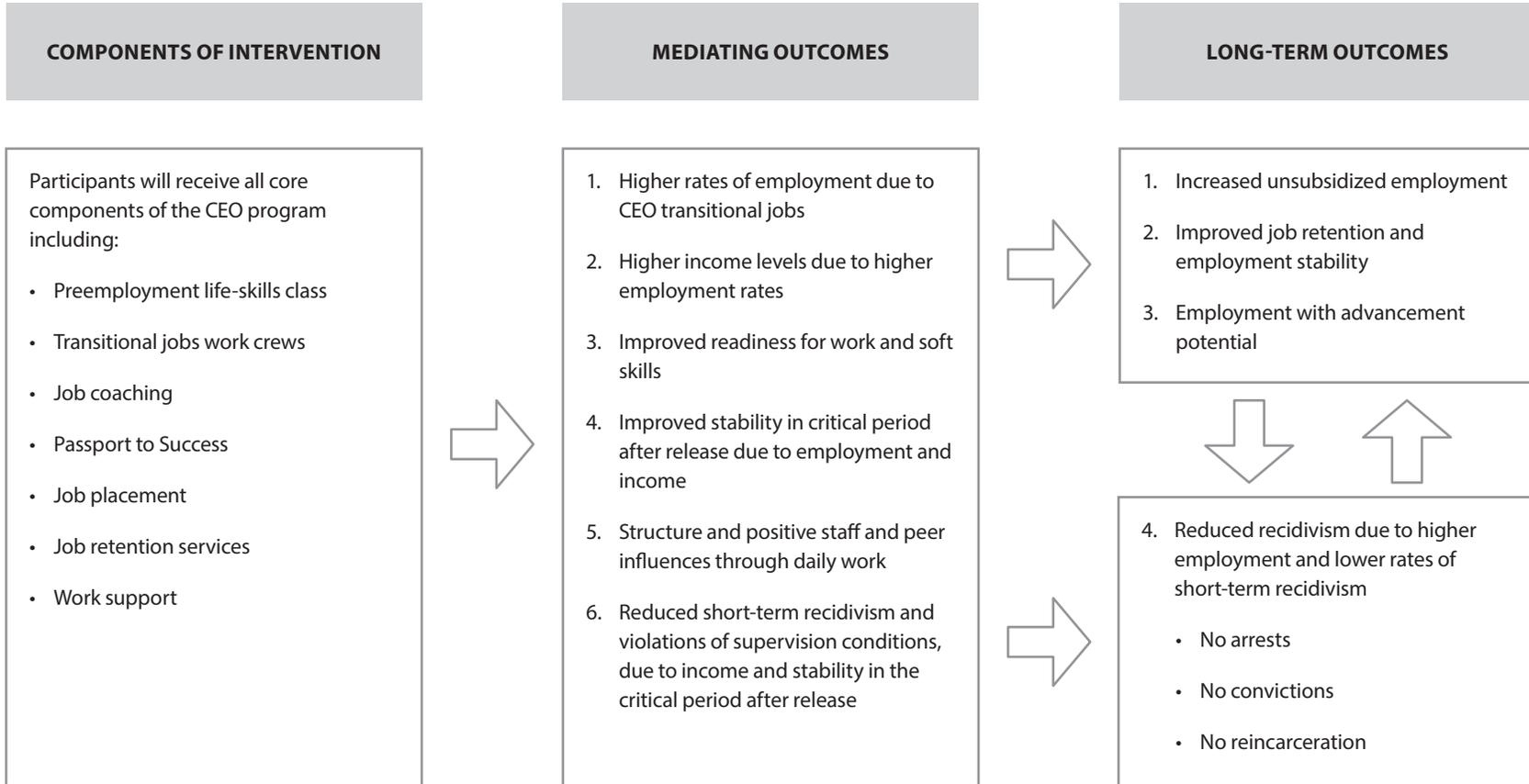
The replication of CEO’s program model outside of New York City took place as a part of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a federal initiative aimed at expanding and replicating promising program models serving socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The SIF is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has responsibility for selecting models for replication and providing matching funds to assist their expansion to a larger scale. CEO is one of 12 evidence-based programs selected in 2011 to be part of the SIF and receive funding and technical assistance to replicate its model in other cities around the country.⁶

In expanding the program, CEO leaders looked for cities that had a clear need (meaning that CEO’s services would fill a niche among local reentry providers); a sufficient number of people returning home on parole for CEO to serve at least 150 people a year; support from local stakeholders (including a strong champion in a government position); and partners to provide transitional jobs to work crews.

In 2011 MDRC began a fidelity assessment of those CEO replication programs that were fully operational. As new programs got off the ground, they were added to the assessment. Ultimately all five replication programs that became operational during the study time frame were included.

6. EMCF matched \$30 million from the SIF with \$30 million from its own endowment and, through the True North Fund, developed by EMCF in 2011, helped the 12 SIF grantees secure the \$60 million they were required by statute to raise to match this funding.

FIGURE ES.1 CEO Conceptual Model



MDRC staff members visited the programs and conducted a series of interviews with program staff members and managers, participants, and service and referral partners. MDRC determined whether replication programs were faithful to the New York City model using a structured process developed in consultation with CEO leaders. This process was designed to focus on aspects of the model that CEO leaders deemed “essential.” These core program elements are shown in Box ES.1, and the full fidelity assessment instrument is included with the full text of this report as Appendix B.1.

MAIN FINDINGS

In addition to assessing programs’ fidelity to the original program model, research visits also focused on gaining a deeper understanding of which components of the CEO model — or combination of components — may have contributed the most to the reductions in recidivism found in the initial evaluation. To that end, the research team conducted a series of conversations with stakeholders (including representatives from mental health providers, other job training centers and nonprofit organizations, staff members in the local district attorney’s office, parole and probation agencies, and employers); administered questionnaires to program staff members and participants; and engaged over a dozen participants in in-depth interviews focused on their path to CEO and their experience with its services.

This report’s findings include the following:

- **Overall, replication programs operated with high fidelity to the original model.** Despite dramatic differences in scale relative to the New York City program, participants in all replication programs received similar orientation messages, performed similar work-crew tasks, and had similar experiences with job counseling and on-site supervision. Most of the variation that did occur owed to the size of the programs: Outside of New York City, the CEO programs were much smaller, typically serving about 250 to 400 people per year, compared with over 2,500 served in New York City.
- **Participants in replication programs engaged in CEO activities at similar rates as participants in New York City, although replication programs did a better job of moving more participants through the early stages and into working with a job developer to obtain unsubsidized employment.** Across all the programs, between about 80 percent and 90 percent of participants made it through the initial Life Skills activities and into a transitional job, and the average time worked in these jobs was typically around 20-23 days. As shown in Table ES.1, the primary differences in participant engagement between replication programs and the New York City program were that more participants in replication programs were deemed ready to work with a job developer on finding an unsubsidized job (about 75 percent across the replication programs compared with about 65 percent in New York City) and more were placed in unsubsidized jobs and received at least one Rapid Rewards bonus (92 percent in the replication programs and 75 percent in New York City). These rates suggest that the program was placing more emphasis on the transition to unsubsidized employment, one of the main enhancements suggested by the original MDRC evaluation of the New York City program.

BOX ES.1

Program Elements Measured for Fidelity

CATEGORY	PROGRAM ELEMENT
Recruitment and Enrollment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of service to intended target population • Size of target population • Presence of a committed criminal justice referral partner (that is, parole and probation offices) • Standing in the community
Service Model and Core Program Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the Life Skills Education class • Implementation of “Job Readiness Assessment” and formal follow-up processes to assess attainment of goals • Length of time it takes to place participants at work sites • Adoption of the CEO work crew model of transitional jobs • Presence of a designated work-site supervisor who is sensitive to the needs of the program’s population • Provision of transitional jobs that allow participants to build basic work skills • Length of time working in the transitional job • Implementation of office-based job coaching • Implementation of job placement services • Implementation of job retention services
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a structure regarding organizational policies, practices, and goals that is commonly understood by staff members • Frequent and active communication among staff members and between staff members and managers • Adequacy of staffing • Availability of organizational resources • Use of CEO’s management information system • Quality of managers’ responses to problems • Degree of coordination across locations

TABLE ES.1 Participation in CEO Activities: Replication Programs Compared with the New York City Program

OUTCOME	NEW YORK CITY	REPLICATION PROGRAMS
Ever worked in a CEO transitional job (%)	88.4	79.3 ***
Assessed for job-start readiness (%)	88.2	85.9 **
Determined to be job-start ready (%)	64.5	75.8 ***
Met with a job coach (%)	81.7	76.9 ***
Met with a job developer (%)	56.4	71.8 ***
AMONG THOSE WHO WORKED IN A CEO TRANSITIONAL JOB		
Days worked in a CEO transitional job ^a (%)		***
1-10	33.7	37.5
11-20	20.5	25.0
21-30	14.0	14.8
31-40	11.6	9.5
More than 41	20.2	13.2
Average number of days worked in a CEO transitional job	23.2	19.9 ***
Average number of meetings with job coach	3.2	1.5 ***
Average number of meetings with job developer	3.8	3.7
Total weeks of active engagement with program ^b	13.2	10.9 ***
Placed in an unsubsidized job ^c (%)	34.7	50.0 ***
AMONG THOSE WHO WERE PLACED IN AN UNSUBSIDIZED JOB		
Unsubsidized job characteristics		
Average starting wage (\$)	9.72	9.19 ***
Hours per week	33.5	35.8 ***
Employer-provided benefits (%)	17.7	29.2 ***
Ever received a Rapid Rewards payment ^d (%)	75.2	92.2 ***
AMONG THOSE WHO RECEIVED A RAPID REWARDS PAYMENT		
Number of Rapid Rewards payments ^d	2.8	5.7 ***
Total amount of Rapid Rewards payments ^d (\$)	177.81	172.89
Sample size	2,560	1,668

(continued)

TABLE ES.1 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from CEO's management information system.

NOTES: The samples from all programs include people who enrolled in CEO between January 2012 and September 2013. To assess differences in participation between the New York City program and the replication programs, chi-square tests were used for categorical variables and two-tailed t-tests were used for continuous variables. Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent. See Appendix Table B.1 for a comparison of each individual replication program with the New York City program.

^aDays worked may not be consecutive.

^bThis measure is calculated from the date of first enrollment to the date of first placement in an unsubsidized job, or to the last date of employment in a CEO transitional job.

^cThis includes unsubsidized employment placements by CEO and self-placement employment that CEO was made aware of or that the client reported to CEO.

^dThis measure reflects whether individuals received Rapid Rewards in the 12 months following enrollment into CEO. It includes only people who enrolled in CEO between January 2012 and March 30, 2013 to allow for 12 months of follow-up, as individuals can receive Rapid Rewards for up to six months following placement into an unsubsidized job.

- **Participants said that the program's most essential and distinguishing elements were its structure and the support of the staff members.** In-depth interviews, semistructured interviews on work sites, and questionnaires administered to active participants collectively suggested that participants found the formal structure of the program to be particularly valuable, saying that the program balanced concern for their long-term employment goals with their short-term financial needs. The coupling of daily, paid work with office-based employment support provided stability during a critical and challenging time in participants' lives.
- **Participants and staff members expressed different views of the value of the CEO experience in affecting personal behavior outside of work.** While staff members reported that CEO work crews function primarily as jobs that allow participants to build work experience and learn appropriate workplace behavior, participants reported receiving valuable advice and support that they applied in their personal lives. Interestingly, participants reported receiving both personal and professional advice from supervisors at much higher rates than supervisors reported providing it. One of the goals of this study was to clarify the nature of the work crew experience, including the role of work-site supervisors and the degree to which work crew participants received mentorship or skill development. Interviews, questionnaires, and observations suggest that the crews primarily focused on accomplishing the task at hand and that most supervisors saw the role as managerial first (with some disregarding the notion of mentorship). Participants generally appreciated the work orientation and anticipated that the crew experience would be valuable to them in their future jobs.

CONCLUSION

The primary goals for this study were (1) to assess the degree to which five CEO replication programs were able to implement the CEO model with fidelity to the New York City program, (2) to examine whether CEO was succeeding in revamping its approach to helping participants obtain unsubsidized jobs, and (3) to explore more fully the mechanisms that may have led to the impacts on recidivism found in the earlier random assignment study of the New York City program. The findings from this study confirm that the five replication programs have been effective in implementing the core components of the model. Despite minor variations in the delivery of services, the research team found that all core components were in place in the replication programs and that participants across the replication programs received comparable services and experiences.

Going into this assessment, one important hypothesis held that CEO may have achieved its earlier impacts because the work crews offered a forum for mentoring or coaching that led to changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors, ultimately leading to reductions in crime. Interestingly, participants and staff members responded differently to questions on this topic. Although staff members generally defined their roles narrowly and did not set out to provide mentoring or advice to participants, participants reported that they did receive support and guidance from staff members that they were able to apply to their lives outside of CEO. Questionnaire and interview responses suggest that crew supervisors saw their role as managers first and only delivered coaching or mentoring incidentally and as appropriate. Overall, though, interviews and questionnaires with participants suggested that it was chiefly the structure and the daily pay of the program that were its most valuable elements.

The expansion and evaluation of CEO's model will continue beyond the publication of this report. In 2013, CEO was awarded a \$12 million Pay for Success grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to continue to deliver and evaluate the effectiveness of its services in New York City and Rochester. The Pay for Success project involves a random assignment evaluation that will yield early results in the next few years, offering valuable information to the field about how the findings from the first random assignment study might be replicated and whether improvements in CEO's targeting strategies lead to even larger reductions in recidivism. CEO also continues to build upon the hypothesis mentioned in the previous paragraph by seeking ways to train staff members to address thinking and behaviors directly. For example, MDRC is currently working with CEO to pilot test and evaluate an innovative cognitive behavioral therapy curriculum to address thinking and behavior change more deliberately in the context of employment for former prisoners.

EARLIER MDRC PUBLICATIONS ON THE CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

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2010. Janine Zweig, Jennifer Yahner, and Cindy Redcross

Transitional Jobs for Ex-Prisoners Implementation, Two-Year Impacts, and Costs of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Prisoner Reentry Program

2009. Cindy Redcross, Dan Bloom, Gilda Azurdia, Janine Zweig, and Nancy Pindus

Early Impacts from an Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Prisoner Reentry Program

2007. Dan Bloom, Cindy Redcross, Janine Zweig, and Gilda Azurdia

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MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.