Prison work programs and postrelease outcome: A preliminary investigation (R-43, 1996)

This study is a first look at the relationship between inmate participation in CORCAN programs and postrelease outcome. The focus of this first report is limited to one important aspect of a postrelease investigation, specifically, the ability of an industrial program to have an impact on recidivism.

A pool of potential participants was obtained from CORCAN program site representatives for the calendar years 1992, 1993 and 1994. A study sample was then created by identifying adult male offenders who had started and completed a prison work program within the three-year period. Inmates whose participation in a CORCAN program was less than six months (from start to end) were excluded from the sample.

From the 2,026 offenders who had uninterrupted participation in an offender employment program for at least six months, 300 were selected because they were within one month of their release date. That is, they had been employed over an extended period just before their return to the community. Further selection criteria produced a sample of 277 offenders who had been released and were available for at least a one-year follow-up.

The results of this preliminary investigation indicated that uninterrupted participation in prison work programs immediately before release may have some positive impact on offender postrelease recidivism, particularly for low risk offenders. Specifically, the report indicates that CORCAN participants released on full parole were considerably less likely to return to federal custody for any reason than offenders without such experience. The report suggests that participation in prison work programs be encouraged early in the incarceration of lower risk offenders who must serve a portion of their sentence in custody.