

# Addressing Offender Reentry: Lessons Learned From Senate Bill 618 San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program

By Darlanne Hctor Mulmat and Cynthia Burke

**A**s the number of ex-offenders being paroled into communities across the nation increased in the late 1990s, the issue of reentry inevitably came to the attention of policymakers, public safety officials and community leaders. This high number of parolees evolved from the drastic increase in the prison population during the last 30 years, due in part to changes in many jurisdictions from indeterminate sentencing to determinate sentencing (which mandates specific sentence type and length for many crimes).<sup>1</sup> As a result, by 2008, the U.S. had the highest incarceration rate in the world, with one in every 100 adults behind bars.<sup>2</sup>

The number of individuals in prison was heightened in California by policies related to parole, creating a revolving door of incarceration. In one analysis utilizing 1994 discharge data from prisons in 15 states (including California), the researchers found that within three years of release from prison, 68 percent of inmates were rearrested for a new offense; 47 percent were reconvicted for a new crime; and 52 percent were back in prison serving time for a new sentence or a technical violation.<sup>3</sup> In California, the response to these crowded conditions was legal action, ending with a U.S. Supreme Court ruling to reduce the number of inmates.<sup>4</sup> Efforts to comply with this ruling included transferring the responsibility for housing offenders who were completing sentences for lower-level offenses to local jurisdictions and early releases to parole.

While more offenders were locked up for longer periods of time, many in-prison rehabilitation programs were cut back or eliminated completely due to budget constraints. Thus, many of the issues these offenders entered prison with, and which may have been related to their criminal activity (such as substance abuse and few job skills), went unaddressed during the confinement period, decreasing the chances of successful reintegration.<sup>5</sup> With researchers and policymakers across the country noting these trends and their implications for communities, there was more attention paid to determining how this revolving door

could be stopped for a greater number of individuals, thereby increasing public safety and ensuring best use of citizens' tax dollars. One program resulting from this increased focus was the Senate Bill (SB) 618 San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program.

## SB 618 Program Description

SB 618 was initiated by the San Diego District Attorney's Office and passed into law in January 2006. The program was implemented for nearly six years before being discontinued in June 2012 due to budgetary constraints. SB 618 was designed using evidence-based and best practices (i.e., presentence assessment; multidisciplinary input into case planning; ongoing case management from prison through community reentry; motivational techniques; and utilization of social supports) and the concept that providing tangible reentry support services would increase parolees' chances of successful reintegration into the community. Nonviolent felony offenders, male and female, were eligible to participate — the same population impacted by California's Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011, which shifted housing and supervision of lower-level offenders to local jurisdictions. All nonviolent offenders with a prison sentence of seven months to six years were offered the opportunity to enroll. Potential participants were culled from the San Diego district attorney's felony prosecution caseload. SB 618 was unique compared to traditional California correctional practices in a number of ways, including the following.

**Needs assessment and case planning.** Participants' needs were assessed before the prison sentence began, and an individualized life plan was created by a multidisciplinary team comprised of program staff, in conjunction with the participant. Four standardized tools determined the level of risk of recidivism and the need for substance abuse treatment and other criminogenic needs, including life skills, basic education and literacy training. The life

plan was designed to be modified with participant input throughout the course of program delivery.

#### **Case management and motivational techniques.**

Case management was provided both during prison and after release, with intensity varying based on individual circumstances. This provided advocacy and ensured that services were accessed to meet identified needs. Since SB 618 was a voluntary program, it was crucial that staff employ motivational interviewing techniques to maximize participant retention and facilitate their entry into services, particularly in the community.

**Social supports.** Upon release, a community roundtable (comprised of the community case manager, parole agent and other individuals identified by the ex-offender as useful to successful reentry, such as a family member, faith leader or sponsor) met regularly to ensure reintegration challenges were addressed. In contrast, traditional correctional practices were restricted to a presentence interview with probation, access to in-prison services, parole supervision and access to community services.

## **Evaluation Findings**

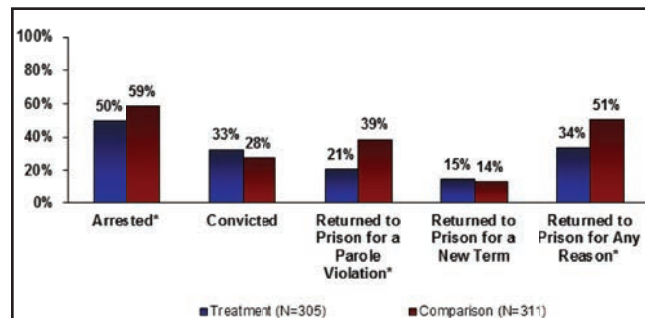
The San Diego Association of Governments conducted process and impact evaluations of SB 618 during its six years of implementation. The process evaluation determined if the program was implemented as planned, measured any system changes and assessed program operations. With this information as a context, the impact evaluation determined whether participation in SB 618 improved reintegration and reduced recidivism, and identified the conditions under which the program was most likely to accomplish these goals. Additionally, the impact evaluation assessed whether the reentry program was cost-effective relative to traditional procedures. It also assessed whether positive change was realized in other areas of participants' lives.

**Participant characteristics.** Individuals in the study groups were most commonly convicted of property theft and drug-related offenses for the instant offense (i.e., the behavior which led to SB 618 consideration), as well as during the two years prior to the instant offense. Under California's Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011, this type of offender serves the sentence in local custody, suggesting that the findings from this evaluation are particularly relevant to local jurisdictions in California, as those jurisdictions implement strategies to facilitate reentry while reducing recidivism.

**Recidivism.** Ultimately, SB 618 was designed to assist ex-offenders in becoming productive, law-abiding citizens, while protecting the public and saving taxpayer dollars. The impact of the program on offender behavior was assessed with respect to four measures of recidivism for the 12-month period following release: parole violations, arrests, convictions and return to prison. SB 618 participants were less likely than the comparison group to be rearrested, returned to prison for a parole violation or returned to prison for another offense (see Figure 1). However, SB 618 participants and the comparison group were similar with respect to reconviction rates and receiving a

prison sentence for a new offense during their first year after release. The finding that fewer SB 618 participants returned to prison for parole violations suggests that SB 618 assisted offenders with parole compliance. Given that California has historically had one of the highest technical parole violation rates in the country, stakeholders at the state level should utilize a system of intermediate sanctions for dealing with parole violations rather than additional prison time — since some parolees will continue to be supervised by the state despite realignment.

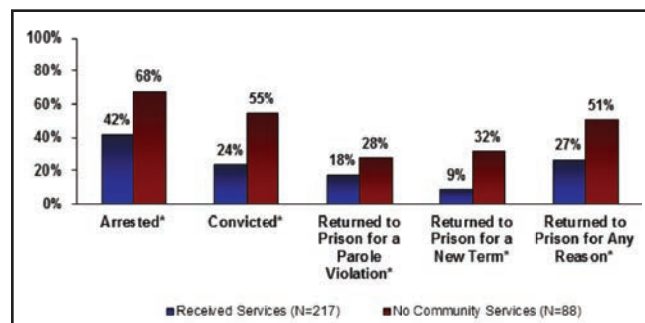
**Figure 1. SB 618 Participation Related to Reduced Recidivism.**



\*Differences significant at .05 level.

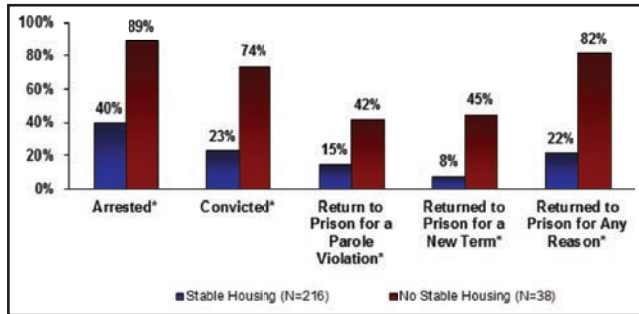
The SB 618 program was based on the philosophy that successful reentry<sup>6</sup> is tied to understanding inmate needs and providing related programming in prison, followed by support and services in the community. Based on this perspective, the analysis examined the relationship between receipt of services (i.e., following up on referrals to community services given by the community case manager) and success (i.e., desistance from crime). Receiving services was related to — as well as predictive of — not being arrested, convicted and/or returning to prison in the 12 months following release (see Figure 2). Acquiring stable housing and employment also prevented criminal activity (see Figures 3 and 4). Further analysis identified several individual characteristics predictive of following up on a referral in the community including age, race, risk level for recidivism, criminal thinking and alcohol treatment history. These research findings highlight the importance of motivating offenders to fully participate in reentry programs, locating stable housing and addressing barriers to employment.

**Figure 2. Program Participants Who Received Community Services vs. Participants Who Did Not.\***



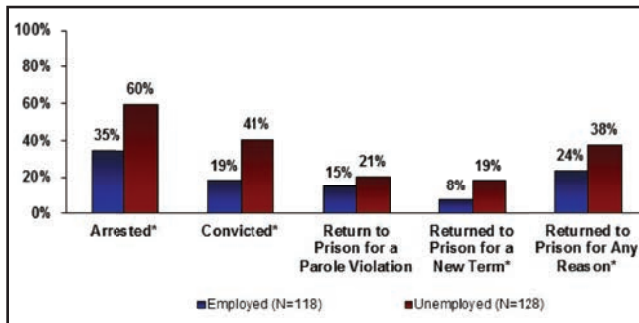
\*Differences significant at .05 level.

**Figure 3. Participants With Stable Housing Were Less Likely to Recidivate Than Participants Without Stable Housing.\***



\*Differences significant at .05 level. Cases with missing information not included.

**Figure 4. Employed Participants Were Less Likely to Recidivate Than Unemployed Participants.\***



\*Differences significant at .05 level. Cases with missing information not included.

**Risk reduction.** Addressing the needs of offenders (e.g., employment and housing) has been found to facilitate the reentry process and relate directly to lowering recidivism rates. This process is referred to as “risk reduction.” For the treatment group, SB 618 participation, was associated with risk reduction in terms of stable housing and employment within the one-year period following release from prison. Eighty percent of the treatment group was living in stable housing, and 67 percent were employed — higher proportions than found in other inmate reentry studies.<sup>7</sup>

**Cost analysis.** Based on the cost-effectiveness and cost-avoidance analysis, the SB 618 program was a cost-effective program and provided long-term savings when compared to traditional treatment practices. The SB 618 program was more cost-effective than usual treatment when success rates were included in the analysis. The average cost per successful SB 618 participant was \$123,648. For a successful comparison case, the cost was \$131,814 — a savings of \$8,166 per individual. These costs considered both the extra costs associated with the SB 618 program and differential success rates.

The average cost per successful case was higher for comparison cases than for SB 618 participants because more comparison case inmates returned to prison. Initially, the cost per case was higher for SB 618 participants (due to the extra costs associated with providing the program, such as additional assessments and case management). However, the costs were lower when the analysis factored in the number of those who returned to prison. The short-term costs of providing the SB 618 program resulted in

long-term savings. The reduction in recidivism (50.8 percent (comparison cases) minus 33.8 percent (treatment cases) = 17 percent) translated into approximately 183 offenders not returning to prison within the first year following release into the community. Avoiding the annual cost of reincarceration (\$49,893 on average) and parole supervision (\$4,771) for one year would amount to a cost savings of an estimated \$10 million.

## Lessons Learned

The experiences of SB 618 and evaluation results provide valuable lessons to guide others considering implementation of offender reentry programs.

**Importance of program fidelity.** During the course of the project, modifications to the original program design were necessary due to real-world constraints such as availability of programming in the prisons. Documentation of these changes through the process evaluation put the results of the impact evaluation in context. It is possible that recidivism reductions could have been greater if the program had been implemented in a manner more similar to the original design.

**Communication as a key to collaboration.** A culture of open communication was fostered among program partners across agencies. Operational Procedures Committee meetings were first convened in November 2005 as the program was being designed and served as one vehicle for communication throughout the duration of the project. Hosted at the district attorney’s office, these meetings were regularly attended (primarily weekly with frequency varying based on need) by key individuals to discuss issues, brainstorm possible solutions and come to agreement on the best course of action. The Web-based data management system facilitated timely communication between everyone working with participants.

**The beneficial role of collaboration in provision of services through partnerships across systems.** The primary method of collaboration in the SB 618 program involved incorporating interdisciplinary team approaches at two key points in a participant’s progress, both of which received positive feedback from participants. The first of these was the multidisciplinary team meeting held prior to participants’ sentencing to review eligibility and discuss screening and assessment results. These meetings were staffed by a probation officer, case managers and a prison classification counselor. The second of these interdisciplinary forums, the community roundtable, was convened on an ongoing basis from the participants’ release to their exit from the program. The parole agent, case manager, participant and any other individuals significantly involved in a participant’s reentry effort attended these meetings.

**Linking services to assessed needs.** As part of SB 618, assessments were conducted locally, beginning before a participant was transferred to the prison reception center. During program development, partners thoroughly discussed which assessments should be conducted and agreed that additional information would be useful regarding participants’ substance abuse treatment and vocational needs. The information gained from these assessments was used in the creation of each participant’s life plan.



A relatively high proportion of participants received services matching their overall needs, suggesting the effectiveness of these assessments.

**Utilizing custody time to prepare for reentry.** By assessing needs in a timely manner, a life plan was developed with SB 618 participant input prior to prison entry. This was done so that the participant could access relevant services while in custody. The inmate could then build upon this foundation once back in the community.

**Applicability to other prison inmates.** The successes of SB 618 suggest that program components previously mentioned (e.g., risk and needs assessment, case plan development and service provision starting in custody that is linked to assessed needs) may be effective for other offenders prior to parole (e.g., higher-level offenders in California because realignment has eliminated parole for lower-level criminals). Since most offenders are eventually released from prison, applying these program components could potentially reduce the cycle of recidivism, as well as the prison population.

**Importance of stable housing and employment, and the value of intermediate sanctions.** The success of SB 618 in reducing factors linked to recidivism (i.e., employment and stable housing) point to the importance of addressing these basic issues in other reentry programs. The analyses showed that acquiring stable housing and employment were predictive of reduced recidivism for SB 618 participants. The research finding that SB 618 participants were less likely to recidivate for a technical parole violation suggests that the use of intermediate sanctions are valuable alternatives for addressing offender behavior rather than additional prison time. One example of an intermediate sanction that could be implemented with successful results is residential substance abuse treatment in response to drug abuse.

**Transitioning offenders immediately into services upon release into the community, along with motivational techniques, including incentives for achieving benchmarks or milestones.** Almost three-quarters (71 percent) of the treatment group followed up on referrals to community services. However, this level of service utilization still means that three out of 10 did not follow up on referrals — highlighting the critical need for developing ways to transition offenders from custody into needed services. For example, upon release from custody, offenders could be transferred to a community transitional center where their needs are assessed, followed by transportation to residential treatment if needed. In addition, motivational techniques and other strategies (e.g., incentives for achieving benchmarks or milestones) to engage participants in all services could help with program retention.

**Cognitive behavioral programs as a critical component.** Full treatment participation (i.e., following up on referrals to services in the community) was associated with program success (i.e., desistance from crime). Further, participants who followed up on referrals to community services scored lower on criminal thinking scales than the individuals who did not take advantage of these services. These research findings highlight the importance of addressing the thought processes of offenders through cognitive behavioral programming as early as possible in the reentry process — ideally in custody before release.

**Usefulness of ongoing data tracking.** From the beginning of this effort, SB 618 stakeholders made it a priority to put data tracking systems in place. Since that time, process and impact evaluation findings were shared in a timely fashion to help program partners determine what works to prevent recidivism. Regular evaluation reports highlighted program elements that worked and implementation issues to address, as well as provided recommendations — enabling program partners to refine and improve the program.

## Summary

Based on findings from the evaluation, the SB 618 San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program improved outcomes for participants. Specifically, program participants were significantly less likely to be arrested for a new offense or return to prison for a parole technical violation. As a result of this success, the program was more cost-effective compared to traditional treatment. The factors found to be most significantly related to success were engagement in community services (i.e., utilization of referrals provided by case managers), acquiring stable housing and being employed. The evaluation findings support the inclusion of intermediate sanctions in response to lack of program compliance; motivational techniques to engage and retain participants (including incentives for achieving benchmarks or milestones); and cognitive behavioral programming to transform thought processes in offender reentry programs.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Austin, J., T. Clear, T. Duster, D.F. Greenberg, J. Irwin, C. McCoy, A. Mobley, B. Owen and J. Page. 2007. *Unlocking America: Why and how to reduce America's prison population*. Washington, D.C.: The JFA Institute.

<sup>2</sup> The Pew Center on the States. 2008. *One in 100: Behind bars in America 2008*. Retrieved from [http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS\\_Assets/2008/one%20in%20100.pdf](http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2008/one%20in%20100.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Langan, P.A. and D.J. Levin. 2002. *Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Supreme Court. *Brown v. Plata*. 2011. Retrieved May 8, 2012, from <http://media.scrp.org/documents/2011/05/23/09-1233.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Travis, J., A.L. Solomon and M. Waul. 2001. *From prison to home: The dimensions and consequences of prisoner reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.

<sup>6</sup> In this study, “successful reentry” was defined as an offender’s desistance from crime for the 12-month period following release.

<sup>7</sup> Visher, C.A. and S.M. Courtney. 2001. *One year out: Experiences of prisoners returning to Cleveland*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.

---

*Darlanne Hocter Mulmat, M.A., is senior research analyst in the San Diego Association of Governments’ (SANDAG) Applied Research Division. She can be contacted at [Darlanne.Mulmat@sandag.org](mailto:Darlanne.Mulmat@sandag.org) for more information on the SB 618 San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program evaluation. Cynthia Burke, Ph.D., is director of SANDAG’s Applied Research Division.*