

Jail Reentry Programming in Arkansas

Daniel Pletcher, MPA

May 2021

Executive Summary

On an average day, approximately 9,000-9,500 people are confined in county and city jails across Arkansas (S. Penix, personal communication, January 2021). After serving time in jail, people often face numerous challenges upon reentry into society including; gaining meaningful employment, finding housing, managing their mental health, and receiving alcohol and substance abuse treatment. While there is numerous research on prison reentry programs, there is little research when it comes to jail reentry, specifically in Arkansas.

What is Reentry Programming?

Reentry programs reduce crime, reduce recidivism, reduce the cost for crime, have a positive impact on public safety, and prepare individuals in jails for successful lives upon release (Roman and Chalfin, 2006).

Reentry programs often include job training, education, parenting classes, alcohol and substance abuse treatments, mental health services, religious services, work programs, and life coaching. One of the main goals of jails, besides housing inmates, is to reduce recidivism. The State of Arkansas defines recidivism as “a criminal act that results in the re-arrest, reconviction, or return to incarceration of a person with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the person’s release from custody (Ref. Arkansas law 5-4-101).

Reentry programs help reduce the recidivism rate by providing services that aid inmates in building successful lives after they are released. For example, job-training programs, GED preparation, and or reading programs

allow individuals to gain skills that will allow them to secure employment and increase their quality of life upon release. In addition, alcohol and substance abuse treatment provides those suffering from addictions with counseling and other services that allow individuals to refrain from going back to these addictions after release.

Methods

In collaboration with Southern Arkansas University, the Arkansas Criminal Detention Facilities Review Office, a Division of the Arkansas Department of Corrections, and the University Of Arkansas System Division Of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Public Policy Center, a twenty-four question survey was created through qualtrics.com. Jail administrators throughout the state completed the survey in order to understand their experience with various aspects of jail programming. Coordinator of the Arkansas Criminal Detention Facilities Review Committees Office, Sterling Penix sent the survey out via email through the Arkansas Jail Association to all jail administrators in Arkansas. Daniel Pletcher then called County jail administrators and followed up with them about completing the survey. The survey received twenty responses over a one-month period.

Overcoming Challenges

The 2019 population of people booked in and out of the facilities that participated in the survey ranged from 200-6,000 individuals. Typically, individual stays in their facilities ranged anywhere from 24 hours- 2 years with

the majority staying for 1-6 months. The main challenges respondents faced when it came to offering programming include funding, space, staff, and lack of connections with community organizations.

Most jails that offer programming receive outside help from community organizations and agencies. These community organizations can be an asset to jail personnel as they can provide volunteers, funding, equipment, and other resources that jail facilities may lack. Because jails often face staffing challenges, having community volunteers allows the programs to be well staffed without having to put a burden on jail budgets and personnel. Overall, community organizations and volunteers are essential to successful jail programming.

Program Spotlight

- The Garland County Horticulture Project educates individuals on the importance of gardening. The program is under the direction of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension's Garland County agent.
- The program provides weekly classes on subjects related to horticulture, as well as fieldwork designed to install a vegetable garden as well as the design and placement of ornamental plants.
- Garland County Extension's Master Gardeners are volunteers that provide all materials and plants. The organization worked with the Garland County Jail to start a greenhouse and community garden. In 2020, over 600 pounds of vegetables were donated to a local food bank (B. Cosgrove, personal communication, April 2021).

MAIN FINDINGS

- 53% of respondents currently offer structured programming to reduce recidivism within their facility, while 47% do not.
- Of those that do not currently offer programming, 11% stated that they were not interested in providing programming in the future, 11% said that they were somewhat interested, 44% stated that they were unsure, and 34% stated that they were interested.
- Respondents who do currently offer programming stated that they might need the following resources in order to continue offering programming in the future.
 - Funding (73%)
 - Connections with willing community organizations (58%)
 - Future Training (68%)
 - Other (16%)
- Respondents who do not currently offer programming stated that it is because of the following reasons.
 - Lack of funding (67%)
 - Lack of computers and other technology (56%)
 - Lack of space (67%)
 - Lack of staff (78%)
 - Lack of interest from community organizations (11%)
- Respondents who currently offer programming stated that as of 2019, they offered programming in the following topics.
 - Budgeting/ finance/ credit recovery classes (33%)
 - Parenting Classes (50%)
 - Job training/ workforce development/ employment search skills (66%)
 - Education (GED prep or other) (44%)
 - Nutrition classes (20%)
 - Religious Services (67%)
 - Drug/ alcohol prevention) (33%)
 - Drug/ alcohol treatment (50%)
 - Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) (33%)
 - Anger Management (29%)
 - Mental Health Support (31%)
 - Cognitive and behavioral groups targeting violence prevention, personal control, and problem solving skills (25%)
 - In-depth drug and alcohol relapse prevention groups (22%)

Recommendations

For Jail Personnel

- Incorporate objective jail classification (OJC) by grouping those in custody by their needs in order to provide effective programming to individuals.
- Apply for grants specifically for jail programming.
- Reach out to community organizations and leaders to see if they would be interested in assisting with programming.
- If already providing programming, conduct program evaluations on existing programs to measure effectiveness.

For Community Members

- Contact local jails and see how you and/or your organization can provide services to individuals in their facility.
- Donate time, funding, supplies, and/ or equipment that jails can use to provide

For Public Policy Makers

- Increase funding for county and city jails to use for creating and expanding programming within their facilities.
- Reform policy to incentivize local programming and reentry efforts in Arkansas county and city jails.

Looking Forward

The future of jail reentry programming in Arkansas lies within jail personnel, community members, and public policy makers. By working together, we can take the first steps today to influence the lives of individuals confined in jails by providing services within jails that reduce recidivism and prepare individuals for a successful life upon release into society.

It is recommended that the survey conducted for this document be repeated in five years to see how programming has changed within Arkansas. It is important to keep in mind that the population numbers used in this document were before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has affected jail population numbers in Arkansas and the ACLU ranked Arkansas number one in the nation for leading the county when it came to the pandemic response within jails (Widra and Hayre, 2020). This was due to in-state work and policies that decreased the incarceration rate to mitigate COVID concerns. Despite that news, COVID-19 has caused in-person programming to switch to Zoom or other electronic resources or to be canceled altogether.

Future research should be conducted to study the progress of jail reentry programming in Arkansas.

Consulted/ Recommended Sources

- Austin, James. (1998). "Objective Jail Classification Systems: A Guide for Jail Administrators." *US Department of Justice: National Institute of Corrections*.
- Crayton, Anna, et al. (2010). "Partnering with Jails to Improve Reentry: A Guidebook for Community Based Organizations." *The Urban Institute Justice Policy Center*.
- Duwe, Grant. (2017). "The Use and Impact of Correctional Programming for Inmates of Pre-and Post-Release Outcomes." *The National Institute of Justice*.
- Roman, John and Aaron Chalfin. (2006). "Does it Pay to Invest in Reentry Programs for Jail Inmates?" *The Urban Institute: Justice Policy Center*.
- Widra, Emily, and Dylan Hayre. (2020). "Failing Grades: State's Responses to COVID-19 in Jails & Prisons" *ACLU: Prison Policy Initiative*.