The Multi-site Evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative

Enrollment Issues among SVORI Programs

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In 2003, the US DOJ, DOL, ED, DHUD, and DHHS funded 69 grantees to implement reentry programs for prisoners. The SVORI funding supports 89 programs nationwide, which are being evaluated by RTI International and the Urban Institute.
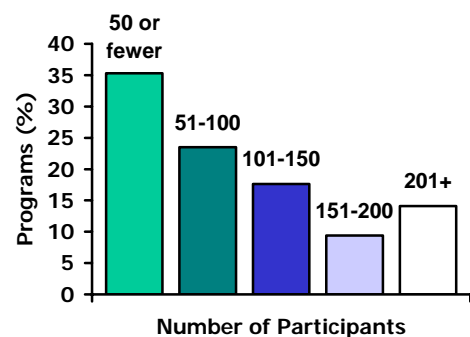
In this *Reentry Research in Action* brief, we describe enrollment issues in SVORI programs, including differences between expected and actual enrollment and enrollment barriers encountered. Findings are based on data gathered from a June 2005 survey of the SVORI program directors.

As policy makers work toward developing or sustaining prisoner reentry initiatives, an important consideration is the number of individuals to be served by such programs. Given fixed budgets, this consideration involves a tradeoff between the level of services that can be provided and the number of participants. In addition, meeting enrollment targets requires planning and the management of organizational issues. This brief summarizes issues surrounding enrollment in SVORI programs. Enrollment and other program implementation issues are explored further in Lattimore, Visher, Winterfield, et al., 2005.[1]

A June 2005 survey of the program directors for the 89 SVORI programs showed that the SVORI programs were small and served fewer participants than the sites initially projected.[2] As shown in Exhibit 1, 60% of the programs had enrolled 100 or fewer participants (the median total enrollment was 108 among adult programs and 54 among juvenile programs), and 37% of the programs had enrolled 50 or fewer participants. Only 12 programs (14%) had enrolled more than 200 participants. Although the total enrollment numbers will increase over the remainder of the grant period (through 2006 for most programs), the current total enrollments are substantially smaller than initial projections given by the program directors. Over half (53%) of the program directors indicated that their total cumulative enrollment (as of 12/31/2004) was lower than originally projected, confirming that the small program size was not by design.

Exhibit 1. Total Cumulative Enrollment in SVORI Programs as of 12/31/2004

Consideration of the steps involved in program entry provides insight into low enrollment among the SVORI programs. These steps include establishing eligibility criteria for programs, developing an approach to identify offenders who meet the established eligibility criteria, and actually enrolling the eligible offenders. In some programs, site-specific approaches for recruitment and programming may involve additional steps before final enrollment, including obtaining agreement for participation (in programs established as voluntary) or transferring participants to selected facilities for programming. Throughout the steps involved in identifying and enrolling SVORI participants, programs may encounter operational barriers. We explored these barriers in detail in the 2005 program director survey. As shown in Exhibit 2, the two most frequently reported barriers were stringent eligibility criteria and offenders being identified too late to complete post-release programming. Other structural problems appeared to limit enrollment as well, such as the unavailability or inaccuracy of release dates and post-release plans.

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[1] Lattimore, Pamela K., Christy A. Visher, Laura Winterfield, Christine Lindquist, and Susan Brumbaugh. 2005. "Implementation of Prisoner Reentry Programs: Findings from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative Multi-Site Evaluation." *Justice Research and Policy, 7 (2), 87-109*.

[2] The 69 SVORI grantees are operating a total of 89 distinct programs. The multi-site evaluation describes characteristics at the program level rather than the grantee level.

Exhibit 2. Barriers to Enrollment	Programs (%)
Stringent eligibility criteria	31%
Offenders being identified too late	31%
Inaccurate/unavailable release dates	30%
Eligible offenders declining participation	30%
Post-release plans unavailable	27%
Facility/agency transfer policies	25%
Not enough potential participants screened	24%
MIS difficult to use/access	19%
Difficulty getting information from facilities	18%
Insufficient resources	18%
MIS inadequate for screening	17%
Few referrals from facility staff	12%

Note: The percentages reflect the proportion of program directors who agreed or strongly agreed that the issue had limited enrollment.

MIS = Management information system.

The enrollment barriers commonly reported by program directors suggest that agencies encountered structural problems once they attempted to identify potential SVORI participants. It is perplexing, however, that the directors saw stringent eligibility criteria as a barrier, given that there are few Federal eligibility requirements (offenders must be aged 35 or younger, subject to post-release supervision, and considered serious or violent) and that most programs appeared to employ relatively inclusive eligibility criteria with respect to offender characteristics. Some program directors did comment that otherwise eligible offenders are sometimes excluded because of DOC/DJJ policies that are not substantively meaningful. In addition, the concentration of programmatic activities in selected pre-release facilities or among prisoners returning to selected communities upon release may have the unintended consequence of limiting the number of eligible program participants—another potential explanation for lower-than-expected program enrollment. Finally, it is apparent that the voluntary nature of many programs (two thirds are voluntary) may be at least partially responsible for lower-than-expected enrollment.

SVORI programs' identification of operational issues that hindered attempts to meet enrollment targets can serve as a lesson to other agencies considering implementing prisoner reentry programming. Most SVORI programs included large segments of their incarcerated populations for potential SVORI eligibility, yet enrollments for most programs have been low. These findings suggest that during the planning stages, agencies should carefully evaluate operational and structural issues related to enrollment (e.g., information systems; potential screening processes; incompatible policies regarding inmate movement, security, and releases), in addition to addressing more traditional considerations, such as staffing and service provision.

> Lack of information such as release dates or post-release plans hinders enrollment because it precludes the identification of the target population earlier in the process. Not knowing for certain that a participant is going to be released is particularly problematic. A few program directors noted that the reluctance of the parole board to grant parole has been an ongoing issue.

Assuming that there is a balance between the level of services provided and the number of individuals served, the small size of many of the SVORI programs suggests that we should expect to see high levels of service delivery in those programs. Preliminary analyses from the SVORI multi-site evaluation, based on both program director and offender reports, indicate that SVORI participants are receiving substantially more services than comparable non-SVORI offenders. Future work will examine the impact of reentry programming on a variety of outcomes.

Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI Principal Investigators

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