

# FOCUS ON REENTRY AND REHABILITATION

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A research report focusing on reentry and rehabilitation in the prison system, and a call to action.

By the Future Justice Lawyers of Chicago

## **Introduction**

Prosecution marks the entrance into the criminal justice system, while prison is often seen as its end. Yet for many, that end is merely a pause—too frequently, they find themselves back inside. There is a long-standing debate over what purpose prison should serve. Still, our view is that rather than using prison as a ground of punishment or retribution, it should be used with a net positive purpose for the community. From a utilitarian perspective, punishment is only justifiable if it serves to achieve good through general deterrence, individual deterrence, incapacitation, or reform.<sup>1</sup> Reform involves making “more positive steps to alter basic character or improve skills.”<sup>2</sup> It is in a sense “reform[ing] the criminal so that [their] wish to commit crimes will be lessened,” making them a happier and more useful person in society.<sup>3</sup> Reform involves making “more positive steps to alter basic character or improve skills.”<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, there are high rates of recidivism, which is costly to society both morally and financially. A study found that “66% of released state prisoners were rearrested within three years and 82% were arrested at least once during a ten-year follow-up.”<sup>5</sup> Following the utilitarian perspective previously mentioned of reform by prisons, rehabilitation, and reentry can produce both social and financial returns. The purpose of rehabilitation programs in prisons is to reduce recidivism. Rehabilitation programming includes life skills, pro-social activities, education, and housing. Many programs also focus on resume-building, interview skills, family support, and continued support for inmates through and beyond their incarceration. While rehabilitation programs are generally meant to reduce recidivism and reoffense, many programs are often selective due to limited availability and funding.<sup>6</sup> Particularly, there tend to be targeted interventions designed for specific groups, such as those with substance abuse issues or mental health conditions, leaving less support for those not facing those specific challenges.<sup>7</sup> Rehabilitation programs are designed to help individuals transition back into society more smoothly after their release. Therefore, they go hand-in-hand with reentry.

Reentry into society provides vital opportunities to help individuals stay out of jail. Reentry “involves reuniting families, eliminating barriers to employment, and finding suitable housing.”<sup>8</sup> Facilitating reentry starts inside prisons with job training and life skills. Once reentered, employment provides more than just a paycheck but also “a sense of purpose, structure, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Greenawalt, K. (1983). Punishment. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 74(2), 343–?. [Reprinted in M. A. Simons (Ed.), *Criminal Law Simons, Volumes I & II: 1.4.3 Introduction to the Principles of Punishment* (Greenawalt) (2020). Open Casebook.]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Latzer, B. (2024, November 15). Does the United States have high recidivism rates? New data raise questions about prevailing beliefs (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 5029176). Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5029176>

<sup>6</sup> Maryland Public Policy Institute. (2021). Five program models for reducing recidivism: A framework for policymakers and practitioners. <https://www.mdpolicy.org/library/doclib/2021/02/Five-Program-Models-For-Reducing-Recidivism.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Perry, A. E., Woodhouse, R., Neilson, M., Martyn-St James, M., Glanville, J., Hewitt, C., & Godfrey, C. (2016). Interventions for drug-using offenders with co-occurring mental health problems. *Health & Justice*, 4(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-016-0041-y>

<sup>8</sup> Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2025). Reentry. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/topics/reentry/>

means to rebuild one's life."<sup>9</sup> Lots of inmates deal with employer discrimination, lack of relevant job skills, or work experience.<sup>10</sup> This "employment gap contributes to a cycle of poverty and recidivism, as individuals without stable jobs are more likely to revert to criminal behavior out of desperation."<sup>11</sup> Studies show that inmates who participate in reentry programs are 43% less likely to return to prison and 13% more likely to gain employment post-release.<sup>12</sup> Overall, through our research, this section introduces the federal and state funding sources for rehabilitation, outlines specific rehabilitative programs under these sources, and illuminates specific financial limitations and systemic barriers in people re-entering society. From our findings, we believe that reshaping for more accountable and reflective models of rehabilitation and re-entry programming and policies is essential to providing needed support to incarcerated individuals and consequently reducing the crime rate.

## **Background on Federal Grants**

Illinois began implementing reentry and rehabilitation programs as early as the mid-1900s.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the initiatives have evolved, becoming more focused with increased results. A significant portion of funding for reentry and rehabilitation programs comes from federal grants. Main contributors include the Second Chance Act, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the U.S Department of Labor, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). State funding, private donations, and fundraising comprise the remaining funding sources. While Illinois has made strides in rehabilitation and reentry programs, its reliance on federal funding limits their efficacy. Federal funds are accompanied by strict guidelines that constrain the program's ability to realize its intended impact.

Before even applying for grants, reentry and rehabilitation programs must meet the eligibility requirements to even be considered. Applicants must be in good legal standing and comply with applicable federal and local licensing requirements (IDHS). In addition to legal prerequisites, applicants must prove their capability to manage the program and the funds appropriately and efficiently. Applicants must also define the specific demographic and location they will be serving (IDHS). Since federal grants are result-oriented, applicants are required to demonstrate their ability to track outcomes and provide evidence that illustrates their impact. Contingent eligibility requirements include partnership with other organizations, fund matching, and sustainability.<sup>14</sup> While these may seem like reasonable requirements, they disproportionately

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<sup>9</sup> Rodriguez, J. (2024, July 16). The imperative of education and employment for reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals. CAEL Pathways Blog. <https://www.cael.org/resouces/pathways-blog/the-imperative-of-education-and-employment-for-reintegrating-formerly-incarcerated-individuals>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> RAND Corporation. (2013, August 22). Education and vocational training in prisons reduces recidivism, improves job outlook [Press release]. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2013/08/22.html>

<sup>13</sup> Shipley, S., & Arrigo, B. (2012, June 26). Family/Community Issues in Corrections/Correctional Psychology. Introduction to Forensic Psychology (Third Edition). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780123821690000128>

<sup>14</sup> 235 successful reentry (26-444-22-3072-01). Illinois Department of Human Services . (2023). <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=170409>

impact upcoming and smaller organizations that cannot readily access the resources to meet the requirements. These requirements disqualify many passionate organizations from having access to funding. For example, many nonprofit organizations, when asked about difficulty finding funding, noted grant complexity as a deterrent to acquiring funding. Grants often require extensive follow-up and smaller organizations tend not to have dedicated grant writers to meet the heavy expectations.<sup>15</sup> A Maine nonprofit wrote, “We are being asked to provide more and more information related to our work by our grantors. Yet no one wants to pay for administrative costs. We cannot keep up the demand for all the administrative work that is being required of us without it being funded.”<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, the requirement to use evidence-based practices “cements traditional white dominant culture approaches,” wrote a nonprofit professional. These practices are often costly and not targeted towards minority communities. This makes them out of reach for non-profit organizations led by or working in communities of color. An example of this is the Family First Prevention Services Act, which mandates evidence-based practices for child welfare programs and charges high fees to certify nonprofits in that practice. Furthermore, recidivism rates, the most common evidence-based practice, are subject to systemic barriers that limit their ability to accurately portray the experiences of individuals returning to underserved communities.<sup>17</sup>

Due to their detail-oriented nature, grant applications require time and expertise to complete. Grant writing for federal funds intensifies these factors due to their technical and competitive nature. The application process requires previous experience, which makes it difficult for newer organizations to quickly receive funding. Demand for federal grants often exceeds available funds; thus, they are highly competitive.<sup>18</sup> Organizations are pressured to adhere to the requirements of the grants to ensure consideration. This limits creativity and growth as reentry and rehabilitation programs are encouraged to stay within the constraints set by federal grants.

Additionally, federal grants are not a reliable source of funding because they are vulnerable to administrative changes. This April, the Trump Administration cut 373 grants from the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs (OJP)<sup>19</sup> (Council on Criminal Justice, 2025). These grants are valued at approximately \$500 million. They were used to support violence reduction, juvenile justice, victim services, and mental health treatment, among others. Thirty-seven states were affected by these cuts.<sup>20</sup> These cuts stemmed from the termination of “nonessential funding” from the Main Department of Correction.<sup>21</sup> The uncertainty of federal

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<sup>15</sup> Thompson, D. (n.d.). National Council of Nonprofits. National Council of Nonprofits. <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org>

<sup>16</sup> National Council of Nonprofits, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Libby, S. (2024b, June 27). Normalizing opportunity: Barriers and supports for successful reentry from incarceration . Education Commission of the States. <https://www.ecs.org/barriers-and-supports-for-successful-reentry-from-incarceration/>

<sup>18</sup> NCSL. (2023, June 23). Successful reentry: Exploring funding models to support rehabilitation, reduce recidivism. Successful Reentry: Exploring Funding Models to Support Rehabilitation, Reduce Recidivism. <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/the-importance-of-funding-reentry-programs>

<sup>19</sup> Yen, R. (2025, May 29). DOJ funding Update: A deeper look at the cuts - Council on Criminal Justice. My WordPress. <https://counciloncj.org/doj-funding-update-a-deeper-look-at-the-cuts/>

<sup>20</sup> Council on Criminal Justice, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

funding provides even more of an incentive for reentry and rehabilitation programs to adhere to the restrictive guidelines required by these grants.

Reentry and rehabilitation programs are primarily funded by grants authorized by the Second Chance Act. The Second Chance Act was passed during President George W. Bush's administration in 2008 with bipartisan support. The Act, aimed at improving outcomes for individuals after incarceration, offers financial assistance in the form of federal grants to implement reentry programs.<sup>22</sup> The Act measures the success of programs by evaluating recidivism rates. The National Institute of Justice found that from 2009 to 2022, more than half of participants enrolled in second chance services gained employment, housing, or received higher education.<sup>23</sup>

In Illinois, grant or program information is tracked when the Illinois Auditor General conducts audits once every two years, which include audits of state agencies, including correctional programs, to assess financial accountability and program performance.<sup>24</sup> These audits help identify inefficiencies and ensure taxpayer funds are used effectively. It is important to look at these audits to be transparent and effective because in 2020, the University of Illinois at Chicago's Great Cities Institute noted in a report on state reentry policies that Illinois "does not set aside specific funding" to support or provide housing for those reentering society.<sup>25</sup> This is a problem because people who were previously incarcerated have more trouble finding a job because of their criminal history. This makes it hard for them to reintegrate into society, allowing them to fall back into familiar patterns. The Illinois Reentry Council tracks milestones by publishing annual reports, but its role is more advisory than regulatory.<sup>26</sup> It is important to have reports to keep track and ensure accountability, and make sure rehabilitation and reentry initiatives follow through; as well as to see the highlights and growth areas of the programs.

## **Examples of Rehabilitative Programs**

Before considering the financial aspects and practical outcomes of rehabilitation and reentry programs in Illinois, it is important to first outline the types of programs available and identify who is eligible to participate in them. A few notable examples of the federally funded rehabilitative programs are the rehabilitation facilities in Cook County, Illinois. Specifically, they are funded by the Edward R. Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) from the U.S. Department of Justice, and there are plans to expand it. The JAG program provides "states, tribes, and local governments with critical funding necessary to support law enforcement, prosecution, indigent

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<sup>22</sup> President Signs Public Law 110-199, the "Second Chance Act of 2007." President signs public law 110-199, the "Second Chance Act of 2007." (2008, April 11). [https://www.ssa.gov/legislation/legis\\_bulletin\\_040908.html#:~:text=Social%20Security%20Legislative%20Bulletin&text=On%20April%209%2C%202008%2C%20President,carrying%20out%20offender%20reentry%20programs](https://www.ssa.gov/legislation/legis_bulletin_040908.html#:~:text=Social%20Security%20Legislative%20Bulletin&text=On%20April%209%2C%202008%2C%20President,carrying%20out%20offender%20reentry%20programs)

<sup>23</sup> Ames, B. (2019, October 7). Nij-funded research examines what works for successful reentry. National Institute of Justice. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/nij-funded-research-examines-what-works-successful-reentry>

<sup>24</sup> Illinois Auditor General. (2025, August 26). Illinois Auditor General – Home page. Illinois Auditor General. <https://auditor.illinois.gov/>

<sup>25</sup> Raju, D. (2024, May 24). Advocates underscore need for statewide reentry programs. NPR Illinois. <https://www.nprillinois.org/equity-justice/2024-05-24/advocates-underscore-need-for-statewide-reentry-programs>

<sup>26</sup> Illinois Reentry Council. (2024, February). Illinois Reentry Council 2023 annual report. Illinois Reentry Council. <https://illinoisreentrycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IRC-2023-Annual-Report-Final.pdf>

defense, courts, crime prevention and education, corrections and community corrections, drug treatment, . . . mental health programs and [other correctional programs].”<sup>27</sup> These correctional programs include, but are not limited to, Drug Treatment Court, Mental Health Court, Veteran Court, and other extreme risk protection order programs.

Cook County is a part of the nationwide network of Problem-Solving Courts, which combine judicial supervision, monitored rehabilitation services, and accountability to target specific populations and prevent reoffense.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, one intended outcome of the problem-solving courts is to save money through reducing re-arrest and incarceration for offenders.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the financial benefits, the programs seek to promote public safety and encourage reintegration into communities.

There are currently twenty Problem-Solving Courts in Cook County, each led by “[a] judge and include a prosecutor, defense counsel or public defender, probation officer, clinical case manager, Veterans Justice Outreach or social workers, substance use or mental health treatment providers, resource/treatment coordinator, project manager, law enforcement liaison and PSC director/coordinator.”<sup>30</sup> Problem-Solving Courts follow either a post-plea or pre-plea model.<sup>31</sup> As the Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts explained, the post-plea model means that individuals charged with drug use-related crimes need to “plead guilty” to be eligible for the rehabilitative program.<sup>32</sup> The successful “graduate” from the post-plea programs may have the charges dismissed.<sup>33</sup> However, the “unsuccessful” participants would be sentenced on their pleas.<sup>34</sup> The pre-plea model does not require defendants to plead guilty to be eligible, in which “unsuccessful” participants simply return to the traditional judicial system.<sup>35</sup> In Cook County, Problem-Solving Courts are post-plea, meaning participants need to plead guilty to the charges against them. Currently, the twenty Problem-Solving Courts operate three primary programs: Drug Treatment Courts, Mental Health Treatment Courts, and Veterans Treatment Courts.

First, the Drug Treatment Courts are designed to provide participants with accessible treatment to improve their health and avoid incarceration for those with drug issues. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, drug treatment courts integrate substance use treatment with additional support for securing educational, financial, housing, and medical resources. In Cook County,

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<sup>27</sup> Beeman, M. (2020). CESF Survey Results. National Legal Aid & Defender Association. <https://www.nlada.org/sites/default/files/2021-1-7%20CESF%20Survey%20Results%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> “Problem-Solving Courts.” (n.d.). Cook County Circuit Court. <https://www.cookcountycourt.org/division/problem-solving-courts#:~:text=Overview,disorders%20from%20becoming%20repeat%20offenders>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., para. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts. (2023). One Size Doesn’t Fit All: A review of Post-Plea Problem-Solving Courts in Cook County. Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts. <https://www.chicagoappleseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/One-Size-Doesnt-Fit-All-Chicago-Appleseed-FINAL-03202023-1.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

each drug court program takes two years and has four phases, each with different goals, such as attending sober support groups, taking part in education programs or job training programs, completing community service, and taking part in legal and health-related responsibilities during probation. During each phase, participants “focus on developing skills and behaviors to help them achieve [their] outlined goals.”<sup>36</sup> To be eligible, participants need to plead guilty to enter a two-year probationary period, have a “diagnosed substance use disorder,” and be willing to regularly report to the program. These and other drug treatment courts combine rehabilitative measures with probation officers (PO) supervision and random drug or alcohol testing to mitigate factors that may lead to drug use.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the Mental Health Treatment Courts (MHC) are post-adjudicatory programs with a capacity of 35 participants and target “repeat offenders charged with felony non-violent offenses.”<sup>38</sup> The purpose of MHC is to reduce recidivism by addressing the “disproportionate involvement and specialized needs of persons with mental health disorders.”<sup>39</sup> MHCs use extended judicial supervision with teams of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, POS, and clinical case management representatives. Participants are required to appear in court regularly for status review hearings. Through this model, MHCs are meant to provide comprehensive case management strategies, which incorporate partnerships with community-based treatment providers.<sup>40</sup> MHCs have four outcomes: successful discharge, neutral discharge, voluntary discharge, and unsuccessful discharge. The former two outcomes refer to a successful completion of the terms with positive or neutral results. The latter two outcomes would lead to consequences, such as prosecution of original charges and violation of probation proceedings. To be eligible, participants need to voluntarily agree to sign a Consent for Release of Confidential Information about substance use and mental health treatment, have an identifiable diagnosed mental illness, and meet the minimum risk score on the screening tool administered by the Cook County Adult Probation Department.

Third, the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) is a specialized program tailored for individuals who have served in the United States military and are involved in non-violent crimes. Participation is voluntary, and eligibility is determined by the State’s Attorney’s Office, which reviews each applicant’s criminal history to ensure it meets the program’s criteria.<sup>41</sup> Veterans involved in the VTC are committed to improving their overall quality of life through addressing post-traumatic stress disorder related to military service, drug and alcohol problems, and other self-destructive behavior to fit into the community as a productive member.

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<sup>36</sup> “Drug Treatment Court Programs.” (n.d.). Circuit Court of Cook County.  
<https://www.cookcountycourt.org/division/problem-solving-courts/drug-treatment-court-programs>

<sup>37</sup> “Drug Treatment Courts.” (2025). U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.  
<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/238527.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> “Mental Health Treatment Court Program.” (n.d.), para 2. Circuit Court of Cook County.  
<https://www.cookcountycourt.org/division/problem-solving-courts/mental-health-treatment-court-program>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, para.3.

<sup>40</sup> Ray, B., Hood, B. J., & Canada, K. E. (2015). What Happens to Mental Health Court Noncompleters? *Behavioral Sciences & The Law*, 33(6), 801-814. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/bsl.2163>

<sup>41</sup> “Veteran Treatment Court.” (n.d.). Circuit Court of Cook County.  
<https://www.cookcountycourt.org/division/problem-solving-courts/veterans-treatment-court>

In addition to the three programs under the Problem-Solving Courts, the Department of Corrections also designed programs and support services to meet the needs of the committed offenders.<sup>42</sup> These programs include Hot Topic Workshops, where offenders can work on issues concerning skills, social, psychological, and physical well-being. Participants may learn to write a resume, go through an interview, apply for jobs, receive housing support, and more. Other programs include Peer Education, which is meant to develop a comprehensive system of case management for HIV positive individuals to promote healthy living and prevent the spread of HIV diseases, and Project CHILD, which is meant to provide the incarcerated non-custodial parent information on child support orders. These rehabilitation programs are closely connected with reentry because they all share a broader focus on reducing recidivism and ensuring a changed life after incarceration.

### **Federal Funding and Its Limitations**

All the rehabilitative programs in Illinois and Cook County mentioned above have federal funding sources and local grants. In particular, the JAG program is a representation of federal funds that may limit the scope of a rehabilitative program, as federal funds are accompanied by fiscal regulations that restrict program impact.<sup>43</sup>

Illinois's funding for criminal law cases and efforts reveals how funding influences the outcome. According to the 2024 Fiscal Year report on State and Local allocations, Illinois received one of the largest total allocations per year, with \$6,394,906 JAG allocations and \$9,498,250 total eligible awards in 2024.<sup>44</sup> This report is significant as it reveals the overall budget each program has and suggests a disconnect between the budget and the intensity of the crimes each state faces.

In a detailed technical report in 2022 titled "Justice Assistance Grant Program, 2022," Dr. Cooper et al. explained how JAG determines, measures, and distributes the funding for a range of program areas including law enforcement, prosecution, crime prevention and education, corrections and community corrections, drug treatment and enforcement, planning, evaluation, technology improvement, crime victim and witness initiatives, mental health programs and related law enforcement and corrections programs.<sup>45</sup>

The award calculation process follows four steps: 1) Initial allocation based on crime data and population; 2) de minimis awards based on the minimum award in JAG allocation; 3) 60% and 40% split into state and local governments; and 4) Local award allocations.<sup>46</sup> For example, Illinois accounts for 4.14% of the nation's total violent crime and 3.78% of the nation's total population. Therefore, Illinois' initial allocation equals 4.14% of \$145,723,493 plus 3.78% of \$145,723,493, totaling \$11,531,755. However, this initial allocation exceeds the minimum value,

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<sup>42</sup> "Programs & Family Services." (n.d.). Illinois Department of Corrections. <https://idoc.illinois.gov/programs.html>

<sup>43</sup> "Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program." (2025). Bureau Of Justice Assistance. <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/jag/overview>

<sup>44</sup> Bureau Of Justice Assistance. Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 State Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program Allocations by State. <https://bja.ojp.gov/funding/jag-state-local-allocations.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Cooper, A. D., & Remrey, L. (2022). Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/jagp22.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

so Illinois will receive the minimum award plus an award based on its share of total violent crime and population. Thus, after adding up the three components, Illinois' new JAG allocation is \$10,728,102. Then, moving to step three, Illinois's state government retains 60% of \$10,728,102, which is \$6,436,861, and the remaining \$4,291,241 is set aside for local governments. Illinois has around \$4.3 million for local awards and 52,852 three-year average violent state crimes. Dividing the amount set aside by the state crime total results in \$82.06, the money available to support administrative efforts that address each crime aside from prosecution.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the state does not have enough resources to fully support these rehabilitative programs.

It is evident that while JAG programs do fund these rehabilitative services, each individual is unable to receive enough monetary support to resolve their issues. Since allocation depends primarily on crime counts and population, the magnitude and intensity of offenses are dismissed, suggesting a disconnect between the efforts each state requires and the support each state acquires. In addition, the report fails to address the benefits of allocating to programs like Problem-Solving Courts. Fortunately, in addition to JAG programs, a staff member in the Cook County Problem-Solving Court has identified additional support during probations, including the State's Attorney's grant and the Chief Judge's grant to help participants get into recovery homes, pay for housing, and go to treatment centers.<sup>48</sup> However, the staff members also relied on the team's creativity to secure and find these funds. In other words, the information and funding are not readily available and transparent to those who are ineligible or have failed to apply to these rehabilitative programs.

Moreover, the biggest limitation of federal grants is their reliance on recidivism rates as their primary indication of a program's success. To be eligible and competitive for federal funding, programs must demonstrate a decrease in recidivism rates.<sup>49</sup> Not only do evidence-based grants pose a significant challenge to new organizations, it sets an expectation for outcomes reporting, which discourages organizations from exploring alternative measures of success. The insistence on recidivism rates as a holistic measure of effectiveness inappropriately controls reentry and rehabilitation organizations. Existing organizations are unable to explore alternative measures of program success, and newer organizations are often not considered because they do not have evidence that demonstrates their impact. This promotes stagnated organizations that cannot reach their full potential due to fear of not qualifying for federal funding.

Recidivism can be measured by assessing rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, or revocation rates.<sup>50</sup> While the most common measure is reincarceration rates within three years of release, states vary in their definitions of recidivism. The Council of State Governments Justice Center's Research Division recorded recidivism rates across states over the last 15 years. Recidivism rates

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts, 2023, p. 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> Lai, I., Stein, J., Geckeler, C., & Paternack, E. (2022, August). Common indicators of recidivism used in program and ...Social Policy Research and Associates .  
[https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP\\_2023-12\\_Common\\_Indicators\\_of\\_Recidivism\\_Used\\_in\\_Program\\_and\\_Policy\\_Evaluations\\_\(Issue%20Brief\).pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP_2023-12_Common_Indicators_of_Recidivism_Used_in_Program_and_Policy_Evaluations_(Issue%20Brief).pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Clement, M., Gottafeld, S., Horn, C., Bryant, C., Saunders, J., & The Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2024, April). 50 states, 1 goal: Examining state-level recidivism. The Council of State Governments Justice Center.  
[https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/50-States-1-Goal\\_For-PDF\\_with508report.pdf](https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/50-States-1-Goal_For-PDF_with508report.pdf)

have declined in more than thirty-nine states, with California reporting the largest decline, with a decrease of 69% and Illinois decreasing by 22%.<sup>51</sup>

While recidivism rates are a good figure to assess impact, research shows that these rates do not provide enough information to be used as the sole metric. For example, recidivism rates are a poor indicator of an individual's post-release experience. They are subject to systemic factors, such as violations of due process or community demographics, among others. This means that recidivism rates don't factor in that people of color are more likely to be arrested than their White counterparts,<sup>52</sup> or that systemic processes like redlining created neighborhoods with a higher poverty concentration and limited access to resources. Individuals from these neighborhoods face greater barriers to improvement, which increase their likelihood of re-offending.<sup>53</sup>

### **Side-Effects of Federal Funding: Systemic Barriers**

Due to the limitations and shortcomings of the federal funding system, the criminal justice system ignores and perpetuates systemic barriers. Systemic barriers such as limited housing, employment barriers, community profile, and racial disparities often create instability for individuals entering society. Reentry organizations and individuals have to navigate these instabilities and hardships. There is a necessity to bring awareness to systemic barriers and work towards eradicating them.

Systemic racism explains the gaps between intended impact and realized results of rehabilitation and reentry programs. Black Americans are imprisoned at a rate that is roughly five times the rate of White Americans.<sup>54</sup> African-Americans are four times more likely than other Americans to live in poverty.<sup>55</sup> There is a poverty-to-prison pipeline that indicates that individuals who grow up in poverty are more likely to end up in prison.<sup>56</sup> The relation between African Americans' higher rate of incarceration and poverty makes recovery from incarceration more difficult.<sup>57</sup> Systemic barriers widen the gap between intention and outcome when it comes to reentry programs. Racial disparities intersect with these systemic barriers. As previously mentioned, recidivism isn't accurate when evaluating reentry effectiveness, especially when it comes to marginalized communities such as impoverished African Americans. Recidivism's overall

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2023, May 16). Racial disparities persist in many U.S. jails. The Pew Charitable Trusts. <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2023/05/racial-disparities-persist-in-many-us-jails>

<sup>53</sup> Opara, I. N. (2023, August 1). The deadly legacy of redlining – and a mission to reverse it. Association of American Medical Colleges. <https://www.aamc.org/news/deadly-legacy-redlining-and-mission-reverse-it>

<sup>54</sup> The Sentencing Project. (2021, October 13). The color of justice: Racial and ethnic disparity in state prisons. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/>

<sup>55</sup> Brown, G., & American Constitution Society for Law and Policy. (2010, November). The intersectionality of race, gender, and reentry: Challenges for African-American women. American Constitution Society for Law and Policy. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/acs/intersectionality.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Mar-Shall, T. (2021, March 29). The poverty to prison pipeline. Law Journal for Social Justice. <https://lawjournalforsocialjustice.com/2021/03/29/the-poverty-to-prison-pipeline/>

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, D. (2020, May). Connections among poverty, incarceration, and inequality. Institute for Research on Poverty. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/connections-among-poverty-incarceration-and-inequality/>

evaluation structure does not take into account how systemic barriers are one of the root causes of the inefficiency that individuals are being evaluated upon.

Reentry programs aim towards employment goals. It's essential for returning citizens to find income to not only help sustain themselves, but also their families, if their families rely on their income. The employment barriers faced consist of legal restrictions. Returning citizens have to deal with criminal background checks when seeking employment opportunities. Despite their skills or previous workforce experience, criminal background checks become a barrier to a career. For African Americans, the adverse effect of a criminal record on getting a job interview is 40% greater than for White Americans with similar histories.<sup>58</sup> Such racial disparities indicate that African Americans face greater discrimination compared to White Americans when it comes to having a criminal record. Not only do individuals face restrictions when reentering the workforce due to their criminal record, but African Americans are also targeted for their racial background. This brings more issues and creates more barriers to reentry.

Housing instability has also been a barrier for people leaving prison systems. Upon release, individual housing becomes a big burden for returning citizens.<sup>59</sup> Jordan, age 49, states, “[t]he agencies would tell me they would charge me \$50 for an application. I would just be upfront and tell them I had a background, and they would advise me not to fill out the application. I did not want to fill out the application [and pay the] fee and get denied. It happened to me once, and I wouldn't let it happen again.”<sup>60</sup> Burdens within housing include legislation, lack of financial support, and redlining.

Federal and local policies that include various restrictions also become burdens. Public housing authorities have the discretion to deny admission on the following grounds: drug-related criminal activity, violent criminal activity, and other criminal activity that interferes with the health, safety, or right of peaceful enjoyment of the property by other tenants that interferes with the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of the property by other tenants.<sup>61</sup> These grounds can be challenging for an individual who has just gotten out of the system and is trying to return. The restrictions on drug-related criminal activity derive from targeting African American individuals, as done during the War on Drugs.<sup>62</sup> Drug enforcement has been seen to affect and target communities of color, especially African Americans.

Discriminatory and racist housing policy and practices, such as redlining, have created segregated communities and neighborhoods with underfunded schools, over-policing, and less access to economic opportunities.<sup>63</sup> Redlining dates back to the Home Owners Loan Corporation

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<sup>58</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. (n.d.). What's at stake? <https://www.aclu.org/issues/smart-justice/re-entry>

<sup>59</sup> Roosevelt University. (n.d.). No place to call home: Navigating reentry housing in Chicago. <https://www.bpichicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/No-Place-To-Call-Home.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Moreno, V., et al. (n.d.). Re-entry housing issues in Chicago. Illinois Justice Project. [https://metroplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/re-entry\\_housing\\_issues\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://metroplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/re-entry_housing_issues_report_final.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> Taifa, N. (2021, May 10). Race, mass incarceration, and the disastrous war on drugs. Brennan Center for Justice. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/race-mass-incarceration-and-disastrous-war-drugs>

<sup>63</sup> Almedia, L. (2021, August 6). A history of racist federal housing policies. Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center. <https://massbudget.org/2021/08/06/a-history-of-racist-federal-housing-policies/>

when African Americans were either denied or received high-interest mortgage loans. The Home Owners Loan Corporation was incorporated purposely to restrict African Americans from homeownership and enforce segregation.<sup>64</sup> Redlining created poverty, health gaps, wealth gaps, and long-term systemic barriers present in our issue of reentry.

The inability to pay housing application fees has also created a barrier for individuals who do not have access to instant financial support after release. In a personal communication interview with Impact for Equity, a reentry program, it was learned that most individuals express the need for present funds after release.<sup>65</sup> Often, without financial resources on their Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) exit date, these people can end up homeless and seek refuge in housing shelters.<sup>66</sup> When people reenter society without access to stable housing because of systemic barriers, it weakens the foundation of successful reintegration.

Given that recidivism rates do not reflect the impact of systemic barriers, they provide an incomplete narrative of an individual's experiences. Recidivism rates measure failures, completely disregarding incremental change by the individuals. As a binary measure, these rates are limited in what they reveal about an individual. Instead of basing success on a single data point, organizations should focus on following an individual's journey after incarceration to get a better understanding of their efficacy. This is a better gauge than recidivism rates because programs can determine patterns of success and failure and adjust their strategies to address their findings. For example, if it is found that certain neighborhoods are not conducive to an individual's growth, programs can invest in relocation services. Federal grants must loosen their requirements, specifically their insistence on recidivism as evidence for success, to allow organizations to enhance their impact.

Collectively recognizing the impact of systemic barriers on recidivism rates and the reentry experience is crucial to combating them. Impact for equity stated the need for different organizers to come together as one coalition instead of representing themselves individually.<sup>67</sup> Unity is key for reentry programs and the fight towards eradicating systemic barriers. Often, programs fighting to eradicate systemic barriers are focused on gaining notoriety, as securing necessities can become competitive.<sup>68</sup> A lot of issues also come from legislators and the difficulty in passing policies. Typically, individuals affected by the lack of reentry opportunities are not included in policy discussions, creating more disparities for these individuals. Thus, their needs are often not met or given proper consideration.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Amyx, M. (2022, December). Detrimental influences: Chicago and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, 1933–1940 [Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago]. Loyola eCommons. [https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/luc\\_diss/article/4993/&path\\_info=Amyx\\_luc\\_0112E\\_12640.pdf](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/luc_diss/article/4993/&path_info=Amyx_luc_0112E_12640.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> J. Imobhio, personal communication, June 30, 2025.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## **Funding Changes and Program Expansions**

Having programs that require more than performance-based evaluation or federal funding can reshape the structure of rehabilitation in the criminal justice system. Observing programs from other states and counties reveals possible alternatives and additions to the current rehabilitative framework in Illinois.

An example is the Delancey Street Foundation in California and New Mexico.<sup>70</sup> Their approach is based on helping find housing and focused on education and training that is peer-led; this also includes partnerships with schools to get a GED or higher education.

Other alternatives, such as university partnerships, open doors to evaluation support without federal oversight. Academic institutions may offer research grants or pilot funding for innovative reentry models. Education is a big factor in someone's trajectory exiting the criminal justice system. Partnerships with universities not only allow incarcerated individuals to build connections but also provide degrees that can make re-entry smoother.

Specifically, removing barriers to employment plays a huge role in helping incarcerated individuals build a better future and reintegrate successfully into society. Jobs they can access are often temporary, offer low wages, and provide no benefits. Thus, Illinois should continue working on removing barriers for individuals who have a criminal record to have more opportunities, such as occupational licensing.<sup>71</sup> This support helps persons who have been previously incarcerated to improve their employment opportunities while also reducing their reoffending. In Illinois, ex-offenders employed a year after release have a recidivism rate as low as 16%.<sup>72</sup> This creates an impact on society by allowing transparency and fairness to open economic opportunities for individuals with a criminal record to get a license in specific fields.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Programs<sup>73</sup> are another alternative to funding and resources for incarcerated individuals. After education, having connections with companies in healthcare, finance, or technology may fund reentry initiatives as part of their CSR efforts. These can include sponsorships, donations, or in-kind support like job training or tech access. This could also include Community-Based Organizations (CBOs);<sup>74</sup> Some nonprofits act as re-granting intermediaries, distributing funds from larger donors or agencies. An example is the National Reentry Resource Center<sup>75</sup> which occasionally announces grant opportunities for grassroots programs. An example of a program that works with partnerships a lot is Operation

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<sup>70</sup> Delancey Street Foundation. (2007a). Delancey Street Foundation: About us – Who we are. <https://www.delanceystreetfoundation.org/about-us>

<sup>71</sup> Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. (n.d.). ICJIA. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/>

<sup>72</sup> Jackson-Green, B. (2016, April 6). Ex-offenders need to work to stay out of the system – but Illinois' occupational-licensing rules keep many out of careers. Illinois Policy. <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/articles/ex-offenders-need-to-work-to-stay-out-of-the-system-but-illinois-occupational-licensing-rules-keep-many-out-of-careers/>

<sup>73</sup> Giving Compass. (2020, August 6). Implementing four pillars of corporate social responsibility. <https://givingcompass.org/article/implementing-four-pillars-of-corporate-social-responsibility>

<sup>74</sup> Thomas, T. (2024, July 30). What is a community based organization (CBO)?. PublicInput. <https://www.publicinput.com/>

<sup>75</sup> Weiss, B. (2025, May 12). Grants for recovery homes and halfway houses: How to secure funding for your transitional home. Sober Living App. <https://www.soberlivingapp.com/>

New Hope in Florida<sup>76</sup>; this is another program that Illinois can adopt as it offers wraparound services including housing, employment, and mental health support.

Private foundations are sometimes less restrictive and come with fewer strings attached to funding. Foundations like Robert Wood Johnson,<sup>77</sup> Open Society,<sup>78</sup> and Annie E. Casey<sup>79</sup> help fund reentry, restorative justice, and community health projects. These grants often prioritize equity, innovation, and impact over rigid performance benchmarks, which are the missions of many programs.

In addition to partnerships and funding, Illinois still has room to expand its program offerings to accommodate modern societal shifts. One program Illinois might consider adopting is The Last Mile,<sup>80</sup> a program currently in eight states. The program focuses on technology and industry training. This program teaches inmates software engineering and coding skills. It's been praised for preparing persons who have been incarcerated for high-demand jobs in the tech industry.

A program that Illinois could also incorporate is JumpStart. This is a faith-based program that begins inside prison but continues to support inmates after their release; the support they give is mentorship, housing, and job placement.<sup>81</sup> The success rate is due to the skills they learn and the relationship they continue to have with the program outside of prison. This peer-led program works with individuals while they are incarcerated as well as after their release. Integrating a program like JumpStart into Illinois' rehabilitation and reentry framework could significantly increase long-term support, which is a critical component often missing in existing models.

Another program Illinois can adapt is the Prison Entrepreneurship Program<sup>82</sup>; this initiative connects incarcerated individuals with business executives and entrepreneurs to teach them business fundamentals and leadership skills. Graduates have launched hundreds of businesses and report significantly lower recidivism rates. In a state like Illinois, home to a major metropolitan hub like Chicago and a concentration of large companies, this initiative presents a valuable opportunity to foster stronger connections between employers and individuals reentering society.

## **Conclusion and Call to Action**

Prison should serve a positive purpose by focusing on rehabilitation and reentry, not just punishment. Reform, the most transformative goal of incarceration, helps people build skills, reduce the desire to reoffend, and aid in reentering society as stable, supported individuals. While

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<sup>76</sup> Operation New Hope. (2025, August 4). Building a statewide reentry network. <https://operationnewhope.org/>

<sup>77</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (n.d.). Taking bold leaps to make health a right. <https://www.rwjf.org/>

<sup>78</sup> Open Society Foundations. (n.d.). Open Society Foundations. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>

<sup>79</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (n.d.). Ensuring the future of at-risk youth. <https://www.aecf.org/>

<sup>80</sup> The Last Mile. (2025, May 7). About TLM. <https://thelastmile.org/>

<sup>81</sup> Henderson, A. F. (2024, November 22). A wraparound approach helps formerly incarcerated people land solar jobs in Illinois. Next City. <https://nextcity.org/>

<sup>82</sup> Prison Entrepreneurship Program. (2025, May 23). Transform lives, restore families and rebuild communities. <https://www.prisonentrepreneurship.org/>

Illinois has promising programs, barriers like funding gaps, eligibility limits, and structural issues often prevent these efforts from meeting their full potential.

The Drug Treatment Courts, Mental Health Courts, and Veteran Treatment Courts in Cook County are examples of the limitations of federally funded rehabilitation programs. Specifically, the JAG program distributes funding based on average crime counts, dismissing the magnitude of offenses. On top of that, each state has finite resources to distribute to local governments, rendering programs to only accept a small number of the criminal justice population.

In addition to federal grants not being comprehensive enough to address the needs of rehabilitation and reentry programs, they rely on recidivism rates as a measure of an organization's impact. Recidivism rates alone do not provide enough information to judge program effectiveness because they are greatly impacted by factors stemming from systemic racism and community profile. Additionally, recidivism rates provide only a snapshot of an individual's experience rather than a thorough understanding of their trajectory after incarceration.

Therefore, our review of current rehabilitation and re-entry programs highlights several systemic shortcomings. First, there is a lack of transparency in how programs are evaluated and accessed; second, there is an exclusion of large populations from targeted support due to eligibility constraints; and third, there exists an insufficient standard of program evaluation that does not reflect the challenges of re-entry.

These issues have not only perpetuated inequities but have also diminished the overall efficacy of rehabilitative efforts. To address this, we propose a multi-dimensional strategy: (1) advocate for changes to statutory evaluation standards and mandate public reporting to increase transparency; (2) expand the availability of information on non-governmental funding to support populations excluded from the eligibility-based programs; and (3) modernize and expand existing funding sources and program offerings to ensure re-entering individuals remain active to current societal shifts.

To reflect these strategies, we propose a new House Bill that would directly respond to the financial limitations of the rehabilitative and re-entry programs:

### **Section 1. Transparency in Program Evaluation**

All state-funded correctional programs shall be required to publish annual reports detailing funding budget, eligibility criteria, program goals, completion metrics, and participant outcomes. These reports must be made publicly available and submitted to the Department of Corrections and the relevant legislative oversight committees.

### **Section 2. Equitable Access to Support Services**

The Department of Corrections shall maintain a resource hub listing all publicly available and private/non-governmental re-entry supports, including but not limited to job training, housing aid, and legal services. This hub shall be accessible to all returning citizens regardless of eligibility status for state-run programs.

### **Section 3. Holistic Program Evaluation Metrics**

The Department of Corrections shall select and keep track of individual trajectory

post-conviction and post-release, including but not limited to community risk profile, job acquisition, financial status, recidivism, and social stability. The Department of Corrections shall be required to publish annual reports detailing specific individual trajectories and use the metrics to holistically improve program results.



Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts is a collaborative 501(c)(3) non-profit organization advocating for fair, accessible, and anti-racist courts in Chicago, Cook County, and across the state of Illinois.



The Chicago Council of Lawyers is Chicago's public interest bar association, advocating for the fair and effective administration of justice.

This report was researched and written collaboratively by the members of the Future Justice Lawyers of Chicago.



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