



Support for the Journey Home

An Impact Study of the Returning Citizens Stimulus Program

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When people leave prison or jail, they need to find stable housing and a way to earn money, among other necessities. The extent to which they are able to accomplish these goals substantially impacts how likely they are to return to prison or jail.¹ Unfortunately, formerly incarcerated people face major challenges that the general population does not. A confluence of factors—including discrimination, restricted access to public benefits, compounding debt, and significant time spent out of the general job market—hinder returning citizens’ efforts to secure stable housing and employment, pay their bills, and maintain good physical and mental health upon their release. As a result, people leaving prison or jail often need immediate financial assistance.²

For decades, most states have made a practice of giving returning citizens a small amount of money, called “gate money,” to cover the cost of transportation and other immediate needs. Most states have offered between 10 and 50 dollars—enough to last from a few hours to a few days.³ But recently, due to increased advocacy around the efficacy of cash stimulus as a component of reentry support in places such as New York State and Washington State, many legislatures have considered increasing the dollar amount of their cash assistance and offering this kind of support more widely.

The Returning Citizens Stimulus (RCS) program — funded by philanthropy, implemented in 28 cities across the United States, and administered by the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) — was a pilot program for this larger-scale reentry cash support. Designed to provide meaningful cash assistance to returning citizens during the months after their release from prison or jail, the RCS program aimed to help people quickly reach stability in their lives outside of prison and reduce recidivism as a result. It represents the largest-scale conditional cash transfer reentry program to date and an evolution of the burgeoning interest among practitioners and policymakers in cash assistance as reentry support.

MDRC was contracted by CEO to conduct a two-part evaluation of the RCS program. This brief presents findings from the second part of the evaluation, a recidivism impact study; it is the first-ever study known to the author to estimate the effect of a large-scale program of this kind on recidivism outcomes. Because incarcerating people is expensive, knowing a program's impact on recidivism can help practitioners and policymakers weigh the costs and benefits of the program. This study was geographically limited to two counties in California: Los Angeles and Alameda. As such, results may not be generalizable to other program sites.

Results from this analysis include the following:

- In the first six months after being released from prison, people who participated in the RCS program had, on average, fewer parole violations than a similar group of recently incarcerated individuals. Participants were also less likely to violate parole by committing violent infractions such as assault and battery;
- In the first year after being released, participants in the RCS program committed fewer parole violations (both overall and for violent offenses) than their nonparticipant counterparts in the comparison group. Program participation was limited to three months, generally shortly after release, and thus, the program appears to reduce recidivism among participants beyond the period when participants were receiving the cash stimulus; and
- The RCS program may have been effective at reducing reincarceration among program participants in the 18-, 24-, and 30-month follow-up periods. However, for methodological reasons explained in the Technical Supplement accompanying this brief, further study is needed to assess the reliability of this estimated effect.

Background

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) launched the RCS program in April 2020 to provide monetary reentry support to formerly incarcerated individuals released during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was implemented in 28 cities across the United States; the highest number of participants came from the cities of Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, and Tulsa.

RCS participants received up to three conditional stipends upon their release from prison, totaling up to \$2,750. To secure all three stipends, participants had to reach agreed-upon reentry milestones. With the help of program staff members, participants chose milestones from a list of pre-set goals designed to be achievable within 30 days and helpful in securing full-time employment and post-release stability. (Examples of milestones included making a resume, participating in an employment workshop, and completing a health evaluation.)⁴ Participants selected a 30-day goal and a 60-day goal tailored to their individual needs and aspirations. They received the first payment immediately upon enrollment and the two subsequent payments at the 30- and 60-day marks, if they achieved their agreed-upon goal for each timeframe.

The cash transfers were facilitated by CEO and 32 local organizations charged with connecting participants to reentry support services and monitoring their progress toward their milestones. Participants received payment via prefilled pay cards.⁵ The program did not set any restrictions on what the funds could be used for, allowing recipients to assess where they had the greatest personal need and use the funds at their own discretion.

The RCS Program Theory

The few months immediately following release from prison constitute the most critical time for supporting individuals to help them avoid future contact with the criminal legal system.⁶ On release, people who are formerly incarcerated often face multiple forms of financial and material distress such as housing insecurity, barriers to work, outstanding debt, and food scarcity. For example, people who are formerly incarcerated are 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.⁷ In many cases, people entering prison or jail face precarious economic circumstances that only worsen while they are incarcerated. As a result, returning citizens often have little or no savings to rely on, in addition to facing significant barriers to full-time employment.⁸ Existing literature on the causes of recidivism indicates that debt, unemployment, and financial insecurity may be strong predictors of future contact with the criminal legal system.⁹

The RCS program directly addresses these realities by providing financial assistance to returning citizens in the months following their release from prison. The theory underlying the RCS program is that the payments participants receive will increase their short-term economic stability following their release. This improved stability will allow participants to experience a smoother transition from prison than the standard release with little-to-no financial support, thereby reducing the likelihood that returning citizens will commit new crimes. The present study tests this theory of change by comparing recidivism outcomes for RCS participants and a matched comparison group of nonparticipants.

RCS Referral Mechanism and Eligibility Criteria

Most referrals to the RCS program came from participating reentry organizations' existing client and referral networks and the social networks of program participants. A smaller subset of referrals came from probation and parole officers. The enrollment process took about an hour. To enroll,

prospective participants were required to meet with intake personnel at CEO or a local provider of RCS, provide proof of recent release from incarceration, complete tax and payment forms, and set 30- and 60-day milestones. Then, an RCS staff member issued the new participant's pay card.¹⁰ To qualify for the RCS program, applicants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Released from incarceration (prison or jail) within the last year;¹¹
2. At least 18 years old;
3. Not employed, or working 20 hours or less per week; and
4. Not employed by CEO or its partner organizations.

Study Description

MDRC was engaged by CEO to conduct a two-part evaluation of the RCS program: an implementation study and an impact study focused on recidivism outcomes. This brief presents results from the impact study, which is funded by CEO and the Justice and Mobility Fund, an initiative of Blue Meridian Partners and the Ford Foundation with support from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

In this study, MDRC researchers used a technique called propensity score matching to compare recidivism outcomes for RCS participants with those of a matched, statistically similar comparison group. Both the RCS participants and individuals in the comparison pool were released from a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) facility during the same time period.¹² The goal of the study was to compare parole violation and reincarceration outcomes for RCS participants and comparison group members from 6 to 30 months after release, to estimate the effects of the RCS program on reducing future contact with the criminal legal system.

While the RCS program operated in a variety of locations across the country, this study focuses specifically on people released from a CDCR facility into Los Angeles County or Alameda County between January 2020 and December 2020. Los Angeles County had many more people eligible for the program than Alameda County, amounting to about 93 percent of all people released in these counties during this period. Additionally, due to data limitations, this study includes only people who were released from a state prison. It excludes people released from federal prison and county jail.

Summary of Implementation Study Findings

In 2021, MDRC released findings from its implementation study of the RCS program.¹³ That study found that, even though participants were not guaranteed three payments, 80 percent of participants met their milestones and received all three payments. Participants mostly used the payments

for necessary expenses such as housing, food, and clothing. Table 1 shows more specifically how participants used the funds provided by the RCS program.

Table 1. Uses of Returning Citizens Stimulus Payments

Survey Response (%)	Two Months After First RCS Payment	Five Months After First RCS Payment
Food/groceries	61.2	55.2
Regular expenses such as rent, transportation, or utilities	57.7	56.8
Other bills such as credit card or medical bills	22.9	20.8
Savings for some future payment or emergency	22.4	12.5
Things to help child(ren) in school	21.1	17.0
Fines or fees owed to the courts or supervision agencies	18.9	17.0
A treat for oneself or others	15.4	12.2
To help other family members or friends with their expenses	12.6	8.9
A major purchase such as a house, a major appliance, or a car	12.4	0.0
Health or dental care, or health insurance	8.2	5.6
Security deposit for an apartment	7.5	7.4
Childcare or child support payments	7.5	4.7
Sample size	976	665

SOURCE: Two- and five-month follow-up surveys.

NOTE: The sample includes participants who responded to both the two-month and five-month follow-up surveys. Survey data were collected from July 2020 to March 2021.

The current study builds on the previous implementation findings by assessing the program's impact on measures of recidivism for participants following their enrollment in RCS.

Data Source

The main data source for this study was CDCR administrative records, which included information on participant demographics, incarcerations, and parole violations. See the Technical Supplement for further detail on the methods and models employed in this study.

Parole Violation Outcomes

Parole is a form of conditional early release from prison; a person released on parole must attend regular check-ins with a parole officer and comply with a predetermined set of conditions. Generally, the conditions for parole for study participants included avoiding illegal activity, reporting any changes in residence or employment, and avoiding contact with weapons, among a wide range of other restrictions.¹⁴ Parole violations can result in fines, changes to the terms of parole, and reincarceration, depending on the severity of the violation. Many parole violations are for failures to abide by preset terms and conditions of release, such as failure to attend parole check-ins, being present in an area that has been declared off-limits, and violating prohibitions on drug or alcohol use. However, some parole violations are for violent offenses such as assault, battery, and murder.¹⁵ Because parole conditions can be numerous and varied, a parole violation is the most likely way for a person on parole to come back into contact with the legal system.

While not everyone released from prison is released on parole, 70 percent of the people in this study were. For study participants released on parole, the analysis examined four different parole violation outcomes at three points in time: 6, 12, and 18 months after release from prison. The data are shown in Table 2. The research team assessed (1) whether a study member had any parole violations during the time period, (2) the number of parole violations, (3) whether the study member had any parole violations for violent infractions during the time period, and (4) the number of violent parole violations. For the purposes of this study, violent parole violations include physical and sexual assault, kidnapping, armed robbery, arson of an inhabited building, threat-making, and any crimes involving the violation of a minor.

Parole Violation Rate

Just 8 percent of RCS participants violated parole in the first 6 months after their release from prison, compared with 14 percent of comparison group members, a 6 percentage point difference.¹⁶ This pattern held for the one-year follow-up period, in which RCS participants were about 3.5 percentage points less likely to commit a violation of any type. At 18 months, there were no statistically significant differences between the research groups. (A statistically significant effect is one that can be attributed with a high degree of confidence to the program or intervention being studied and is unlikely to have been observed if the program had no true effect.)

Number of Parole Violations

Similarly, RCS participants committed fewer parole violations, on average, than comparison group members during the 6- and 12-month follow-up periods. This effect was no longer statistically significant at 18 months.

Table 2. Effects of RCS on Parole Violation Outcomes After 6, 12, and 18 Months

	Participant Group	Comparison Group	Difference	P-Value
6-month outcomes				
Ever had a parole violation (%)	8.43	14.38	-5.95	0.000***
Number of parole violations	0.14	0.22	-0.08	0.007***
Ever had a parole violation for a violent offense (%)	0.99	2.77	-1.79	0.007***
Number of parole violations for a violent offense	0.01	0.03	-0.02	0.005***
12-month outcomes				
Ever had a parole violation (%)	20.27	23.78	-3.50	0.081*
Number of parole violations	0.38	0.50	-0.12	0.025**
Ever had a parole violation for a violent offense (%)	3.69	5.90	-2.20	0.034**
Number of parole violations for a violent offense	0.04	0.07	-0.03	0.005***
18-month outcomes				
Ever had a parole violation (%)	23.47	25.32	-1.85	0.372
Number of parole violations	0.54	0.66	-0.12	0.107
Ever had a parole violation for a violent offense (%)	5.67	6.70	-1.03	0.378
Number of parole violations for a violent offense	0.06	0.08	-0.02	0.099*
Sample size	824	824		

SOURCE: Calculations based on data from the California Department of Justice and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Violent Parole Violation Rate

RCS participants were about 2 percentage points less likely to commit a violent parole violation during the 6- and 12-month follow-up periods than comparison group members. There was no significant effect on the rate of violation for violent offenses at the 18-month mark.

Number of Violent Parole Violations

RCS participants committed fewer violent parole violations during the 6- and 12-month follow-ups than their comparison group counterparts, though this difference was slight. This effect persisted to the 18-month mark, though this difference was only marginally statistically significant.

Reincarceration Outcomes

The reincarceration measures for this study include incarcerations in state prisons only. State prisons are typically used for postconviction incarceration, with some exceptions. The time from arrest to conviction can often span several years. Because of this, the reincarceration data are unlikely to show any program impact on reincarceration in the short term, when most criminal cases have not yet reached a final disposition.

The research team tested reincarceration outcomes beginning at 6 months and ending at 30 months — the longest follow-up period for which MDRC could obtain complete data — for all study members. The data are shown in Table 3. As expected, the program had no observed effects on reincarceration at 6 months, so the discussion below focuses on the time frames for which an effect was more feasible: at one year and beyond.

Reincarceration Rate

The program had no observed effect on reincarceration rate over 12 months. However, RCS participants were roughly 2 percentage points less likely to be reincarcerated 18 and 24 months after their release, compared with comparison group members. At 30 months, participants were 2.5 percentage points less likely to be reincarcerated. However, all program effects on reincarceration were significant only at the 0.1 level.

Number of Reincarcerations

Similarly, the program had no observed effect on the number of reincarcerations participants experienced in the first year after being released. However, RCS participants had marginally fewer reincarcerations than comparison group members within the 18-, 24-, and 30-month follow-up periods.

Limitations of the Reincarceration Outcomes

Additional analysis of the findings discussed above suggests a high probability that bias affected the estimated program effects on reincarceration. Though quasi-experimental designs can mitigate many of the pitfalls of not being able to run a traditional experiment, one risk inherent in nonexperimental studies is that of selection bias. Selection bias can occur when people opt in to or out of a program not based on random chance but on one or more factors. For example, a person who is struggling financially may be more likely to opt in to a cash assistance program than someone

Table 3. Effects of RCS on Reincarceration Outcomes After 12, 18, 24, and 30 Months

	Participant Group	Comparison Group	Difference	P-Value
12-month outcomes				
Number of reincarcerations	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.238
Ever reincarcerated (%)	1.12	1.82	-0.70	0.238
18-month outcomes				
Number of reincarcerations	0.03	0.05	-0.02	0.055*
Ever reincarcerated (%)	3.11	4.95	-1.85	0.055*
24-month outcomes				
Number of reincarcerations	0.07	0.09	-0.02	0.180
Ever reincarcerated (%)	6.22	8.45	-2.23	0.079*
30-month outcomes				
Number of reincarcerations	0.09	0.12	-0.03	0.079*
Ever reincarcerated (%)	8.43	11.00	-2.57	0.071*
Sample size	812	823		

SOURCE: Calculations based on data from the California Department of Justice and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

NOTES: The sample sizes differ between the research groups due to 13 people in the sample having missing reincarceration data.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

who is financially secure. Selection bias can create the illusion of program effects when, in fact, the differences in outcomes are better attributed to the one or more nonrandom factors that influenced program participation. In this case, CEO reported across-the-board excitement from prospective participants about enrolling in the program, so bias arising from self-selection into the program may not be quite as prominent here as with other programs. However, due to the program's referral approach (details on which are available in the Technical Supplement) and the inherent risk of selection bias in quasi-experimental research, performing statistical checks to predict how susceptible program effects may be to this bias is always advised. In the case of this study, while the parole violation outcomes tested as robust against selection bias, the reincarceration outcomes did not. Therefore, the reincarceration findings presented here should be interpreted with caution. See the Technical Supplement for more details.

Summary of Subgroup Analyses

The research team ran two subgroup analyses to assess whether the RCS program had differential effects on people with different demographic characteristics — specifically, age and race/ethnicity. The age subgroup analysis tested four age categories: 18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 49, and 50 and above. The race/ethnicity analysis tested three categories: Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and other.¹⁷ The goal of the subgroup analyses was to assess whether any of the program effects were statistically different across the subgroups, indicating that the program had more pronounced effects for one or more subgroups compared with the others.

Two effects were statistically different across age groups: the numbers of parole violations for a violent offense within 12 months of release and within 18 months of release. The analysis suggests that the program was most effective at reducing the frequency of violent parole violations for the youngest age group (ages 18 to 24). Two effects were also different to a statistically significant degree across racial/ethnic groups: the rate and the number of parole violations for a violent offense within 12 months. On these measures, participants in the Black subgroup experienced a more pronounced positive effect from the program than participants in the other racial/ethnic subgroups. See the Technical Supplement for additional information on the subgroup analysis and its results.

Discussion

Results from this analysis suggest that the RCS program was effective at reducing parole violations among participants in Los Angeles and Alameda counties in the first year after their release from prison. Results also suggest a program effect on parole violations at 18 months after release and on reincarcerations at 18 months and beyond, though these estimates are less certain.

Participation in the program is limited to only a couple of months, typically shortly after one's release from incarceration. This means that RCS influenced outcomes well beyond the period of active program engagement. These findings provide significant support for the further study of RCS and similar cash assistance initiatives. In particular, research that can better isolate the effects of such programs is needed.

About 90 percent of states provide aid to people leaving prison or jail.¹⁸ Yet to be determined, however, are the most effective approaches to and models of reentry support. This study provides evidence that the approach used in the RCS program could reduce future contact with the criminal legal system.

Though understudied, reentry cash stimulus is emerging as a key policy issue across the country. Major cities such as New York City and entire states such as Colorado are currently considering legislation to codify and greatly expand the support provided by their reentry cash assistance programs.¹⁹ Though this study provides valuable insight into the potential benefits of building out such

support, its relatively small scope and the nonrandom nature of the program's recruitment method mean that the findings may not represent what would happen with a wider population of returning citizens. Further research is essential — both to make the findings presented here more robust and reliable and to examine additional outcomes that measure returning citizens' stability, such as employment, housing, and health statuses.

Notes and References

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- 4 Center for Employment Opportunities, *Returning Citizen Stimulus (RCS) Implementation Guide* (Center for Employment Opportunities, 2022, website: <https://ceoworks.org/assets/downloads/CEO-RCS-Guide.pdf>).
- 5 The pay cards were issued by a private vendor — "Skylight pay cards" — and functioned like a debit card. They came preloaded with the first payment amount, which participants could use toward any transaction where a traditional debit card could be used. The cards were reloaded as participants met their monthly milestones. See Ivonne Garcia, Margaret Hennessy, Erin J. Valentine, Jed Teres, and Rachel Sander, *Paving the Way Home: An Evaluation of the Returning Citizens Stimulus Program* (MDRC, 2021, website: https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/2021_RCS_Evaluation_Report.pdf); Nancy G. La Vigne, Tracey L. Shollenberger, and Sara A. Debus, *One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas* (The Urban Institute, 2009).
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- 10 Garcia et al. (2021); Rossi, Berk, and Lenihan (1980).
- 11 Released on or after January 1, 2020.
- 12 For results from the implementation study, see Garcia et al. (2021).
- 13 Garcia et al. (2021).
- 14 California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, "Parole Conditions" (website: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/parole/parole-conditions/>, 2025).

- 15 Some parole violations do not ultimately result in a criminal charge, but many do, as there is a lower standard of evidence for being found in violation of parole than there is for being found guilty of a crime.
- 16 Violation rates may be lower than in normal years due to changes temporarily instituted during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 17 Categories were selected according to a prevalence-based criteria outline, described in the Technical Supplement.
- 18 Armstrong and Lewis (2019).
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