

The Economics of Inmate Labor Force Participation

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The George Washington University

The Center on Crime, Communities & Culture, of The Open Society Institute

Chapter 7

Afternoon Small-Group Sessions

After the panel (and lunch) afternoon small-group sessions identified key viewpoints and action recommendations from varying stakeholder perspectives. The sessions were organized and assisted by professional facilitators from The Public Conversations Project, of Watertown, Massachusetts. Speakers from the morning sessions were available for consultation.

Because of (1) the wide range of stakeholders with widely differing perspectives, (2) the newness of the issue to many participants, (3) the novelty of the economists' views, and (4) the limitations of time, goals for afternoon sessions were defined *within* rather than *across* stakeholder groups. Participants were assigned based on registration information, to groups including corrections, correctional industries, corrections reform, economics, economic development, education and training, families, fathers, health and substance abuse, inmates and inmate labor, labor economics, labor unions, lawmakers, victims, women and children, and others.

Groups were to identify (1) important features of promise in the economics of inmate labor, (2) principal issues of concern, and (3) key actions to be taken. A verbatim record of stakeholder views is provided in the symposium transcript. In general, groups emphasized the following points:

Positives – Points of View or Alternatives Viewed Favorably

- Most were encouraged that the economists viewed inmate employment as a good.
- Assessing inmate employment's minor effects on the larger economy was viewed *favorably*, as eliminating concerns of threat to the overall society.
- Most were encouraged that inmate employment would likely reduce recidivism.
- Inmates' ability to contribute to child and family support was favorably viewed.
- Some were encouraged by the need for and emphasis on education and training.

Negatives – Issues of Concern

- Participants repeated concerns that the benefit of reduced recidivism through employment may be assumed rather than demonstrated.
- Ignorance of prisons and of the specific components of work yielding success weakened the more general optimism for the posed benefits of inmate work.

- Concerns were raised about the absence of specific implementation steps necessary for success.
- Transitional and post-release adjustment issues were repeatedly raised as concerns, including education and training, and support in reintegrating to families, jobs, and communities.
- In the symposium, the absences of participation by and attention to minorities and females were raised as key issues of concern.
- Lack of attention to experiences outside the United States was raised as a serious concern.
- Concerns were raised about the possibility of affording market-wages for inmate employees.

Recommended Actions

In general, participants found existing evidence on either the benefits or the costs of inmate employment to be fairly thin and not fully convincing and a lack of specifics in both the bases and recommendations for action. Therefore, the major recommendations for action focused on learning and research.

- Both the *measurement* of recidivism effects of inmate employment and the *explanation* of the components of employment reducing recidivism need much more research.
- The social processes of adjustment, including via education, need additional research.
- Demonstration programs are sorely needed, in education and training, in employment, and in transition and community integration.
- Effects of inmate unemployment and employment on children, families, and family reintegration after release badly need research attention.