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Out of Jail, and Into a Job

By [TINA ROSENBERG](#)

[Fixes](#) looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

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About two months ago, Angel Padilla was walking near Madison Square Garden when the driver of a linen service truck started shouting and waving at him. “Hey Angel! C.E.O.!” the driver said. “Look at me — I’m driving now!”

Padilla was surprised. He knew the driver — he was a guy named Jose whom he’d supervised six months before. Padilla works at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, but his real employer is the [Center for Employment Opportunities](#), (C.E.O.) a New York organization that specializes in helping ex-offenders find and keep jobs. Padilla supervises a crew of from five to seven parolees as they do temporary, minimum-wage janitorial jobs at John Jay.

Jose had stuck in his mind. “He was terrible. This guy had major attitude,” Padilla said. “His thing was, ‘Oh, I ain’t making enough money to be doing all this work.’” Every day Padilla evaluates the men in his crew — are they on time? Appropriately dressed? Do they take direction? Make a serious effort? Work well with others? He gives them marks ranging from a low of one to a high of five. “I gave him all zeros on his first day,” Padilla said. “We don’t have zeros, but I wrote them in.”

The next day, however, Jose came in apologizing and earned twos. He continued to improve. The fourth day he earned straight fours. And six months later, he was waving at Padilla from his truck, the proud holder of a real job.

Padilla’s program, called Transitional Jobs, is unusual. It may, in fact, be unique. Recently [MDRC](#), a research organization that assesses social policies, published its [evaluation](#) of the program. It found that for people who started within three months of getting out of prison, the program reduced recidivism by 16 to 22 percent compared to a randomized control group, depending on whether you were looking at arrests, convictions or incarceration.

Jeyhoun Allebaugh Workers with the Center for Employment Opportunities in Central Park after the EIF:Revlon Run/Walk for Women in 2011.

The program sends ex-prisoners to five days of training in “soft” work skills — how to behave in a workplace. Then it places them in jobs, mostly in city agencies doing maintenance or janitorial work. Participants get a paycheck at the end of each day. They work four days a week, and on day five meet in C.E.O.’s offices with a job coach to go over their grades for the week and work on their skills. The idea is to give the men some job history, basic work skills and grades that allow prospective employers to assess their work readiness.

“We are having a dramatic impact on reducing the first instance of recidivism when they come home,” said Mindy Tarlow, the C.E.O. of C.E.O. “By not committing another crime during this really fragile period they may be actually shifting their behavior: I don’t have to go down this road, I can go down that road. When people come home from prison they are at their most motivated to turn their lives around. We are trying to take advantage of that opportunity.”

The impact was greatest among the people with the highest risk of re-offending: the youngest, those with the least education or the most past convictions, and those most recently released from prison. (Recidivism is highest the first year out of prison, and then drops; in a few years, a former prisoner’s risk of committing a new crime is no different from that of others of the same age.)

A reduction of one-fifth might seem like nothing to write a column about. But in fact, it is remarkable. There are many transitional jobs programs in the United States; C.E.O.’s is the biggest that serves only the formerly incarcerated. MDRC has evaluated five such programs, said Dan Bloom, the project director of MDRC’s evaluation of C.E.O.’s program. And none of the others had any effect on recidivism. The only transitional jobs program that made a dent in future criminality was C.E.O.’s.

This matters. Nationally, two-thirds of all released prisoners are rearrested within three years. In New York State, about 25,000 people are released into their communities every year. (The majority come back to New York City, but the proportion who come from other parts of the state is rising.)

Each year of incarceration [costs](#) New York State more than \$27,000 per inmate. The evaluation found that C.E.O.’s program produced benefits of between \$1.26 and \$3.85 per dollar spent; it saved society \$4,900 per participant. The savings came mainly in incarceration averted, but it also considers the value the participants contribute at their work sites. For the recently released — the target group for the intervention — it saved \$8,300 per person. C.E.O. is expanding the program, in New York City and upstate, in Rochester, Albany, Binghamton and Buffalo.

In February, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced an [initiative](#) called Work for Success, which aims to create a comprehensive statewide approach to increasing job readiness and

employment for ex-offenders. The announcement specifically mentions the achievements of C.E.O.'s program, and Tarlow leads the group's executive committee.

At Fixes, we like to look for positive deviants. In a field where most efforts fail – certainly the case with anti-crime initiatives – the programs that succeed have a lot to teach us. So what is C.E.O. doing differently?

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C.E.O.'s program looks a lot like other transitional jobs programs – except for one thing: At C.E.O., the clients are not dropped into a regular workplace, but organized into work crews. Although most of the time, felons are not allowed to have contact with other felons, the parole system makes exceptions for programs like these. The men work together, eat lunch together, take coffee breaks together. They are closely supervised by people like Padilla, who, like many of the crew chiefs and instructors, served time himself.

When the men complain about their minimum wage paychecks, Padilla can remind them from personal experience that prison jobs pay only a few cents a day. “I was making 5 or 10 cents a day,” he tells them. “I budgeted it. It's the same thing you have to do here.”

Daniel Cook is 22. In November, he got out of prison after serving 16 months for selling drugs. In December, he started the Transitional Jobs program. On his first day he showed up late and got a reprimand from his instructor. “That first week I was lazy, unprepared, unpunctual,” he said. “But if you're late – even 5 or 10 minutes – you get sent home, and if you're sent home you don't get paid for the day.”

Now he approves. “It teaches you time management,” he said. “It teaches you to maintain a job.”

“I still kind of had the prison mentality – you can't be nice or talk to a lot of people because it's a sign of weakness.” But he found teamwork was necessary. His first job was shoveling snow and doing highway cleanup on Staten Island. Then he did janitorial work. The job he found most interesting was working on a team setting up a computer lab – building cubicles and installing wiring. “It was like an actual construction site, with carpenters and electricians running around,” he said. “That's the kind of work I want to get into.

“You have to get to know each other and work together in order to get the job done,” he said. “The program definitely changed my way of interacting.”

The main topic of conversation among the men, he said, was getting a job. (Padilla said it was the same with his crews.) They'd report in about who was hiring – Cook knew about Staten Island, where he's from, and others could talk about Queens or Brooklyn. “If one person heard about someone hiring, we'd all try to piggyback off each other,” he said.

His C.E.O. coach declared him ready for real jobs and he has been going to interviews — I talked to him last week as he was walking to an interview for a job in the receiving department of a store in Queens.

“We’ll never know for sure why C.E.O.’s results are different,” said Bloom. “We think there may be some kind of peer effect. The other programs don’t have the same feeling of a bunch of guys who have just been through the same thing with a supervisor who also has been through the same thing. They are all together in a positive environment and getting motivation coaching.”

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