

# Developing American Job Centers in Jails: Implementation of the Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP) Grants

## LEAP



Final Report Executive Summary:  
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## Executive Summary

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To help individuals successfully reenter society after time in jail, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded \$10 million in grants to 20 local workforce development boards (LWDBs) in June 2015 for the Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP) initiative. Central to the LEAP initiative was creating jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs) with direct linkages to community-based AJCs. A complex array of factors including jail and local community characteristics influenced the development and operations of jail-based AJCs as well as the experiences and outcomes of participants (Figure ES.1). The overarching goals were to increase participants' work readiness at the time of release, increase employment after release, and reduce recidivism; additional goals for the pilot initiative included demonstrating that corrections and workforce agencies could effectively collaborate to provide pre-release services, generate lessons learned around promising strategies and common challenges that could inform future efforts; and identify ways for grantees to sustain the jail-based AJCs when the DOL-funded grant ended. The grants covered 9 months of planning and 15 months of service delivery, with many grantees receiving up to a one-year no-cost extension to finish spending down remaining grant resources. Grantees were geographically diverse, located in 13 states across 5 DOL regions, and involved a total of 22 county jails.<sup>1</sup>

- **The LEAP initiative demonstrated the feasibility of offering AJC services in a jail setting.** This was a new approach for DOL and the majority of the sites, but all sites successfully operated jail-based AJCs. Eleven of the 20 sites planned to maintain the jail-based AJC after the end of the grant, and 6 were exploring options for sustainability.

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### Overview of the evaluation

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In September 2015, DOL's Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates to conduct a 36-month evaluation of the Employment and Training Administration's Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP) grants. The evaluation examined the early-start up and implementation of 20 LEAP pilots, which created jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs) to support the successful reentry of participants and directly link them to community-based AJCs upon release. Through site visits, phone interviews, focus groups, and the grantees' quarterly performance reports, the evaluation examined the LEAP pilots' approaches to providing services before and after incarceration at all 20 sites.

Beyond this report, the evaluation also produced:

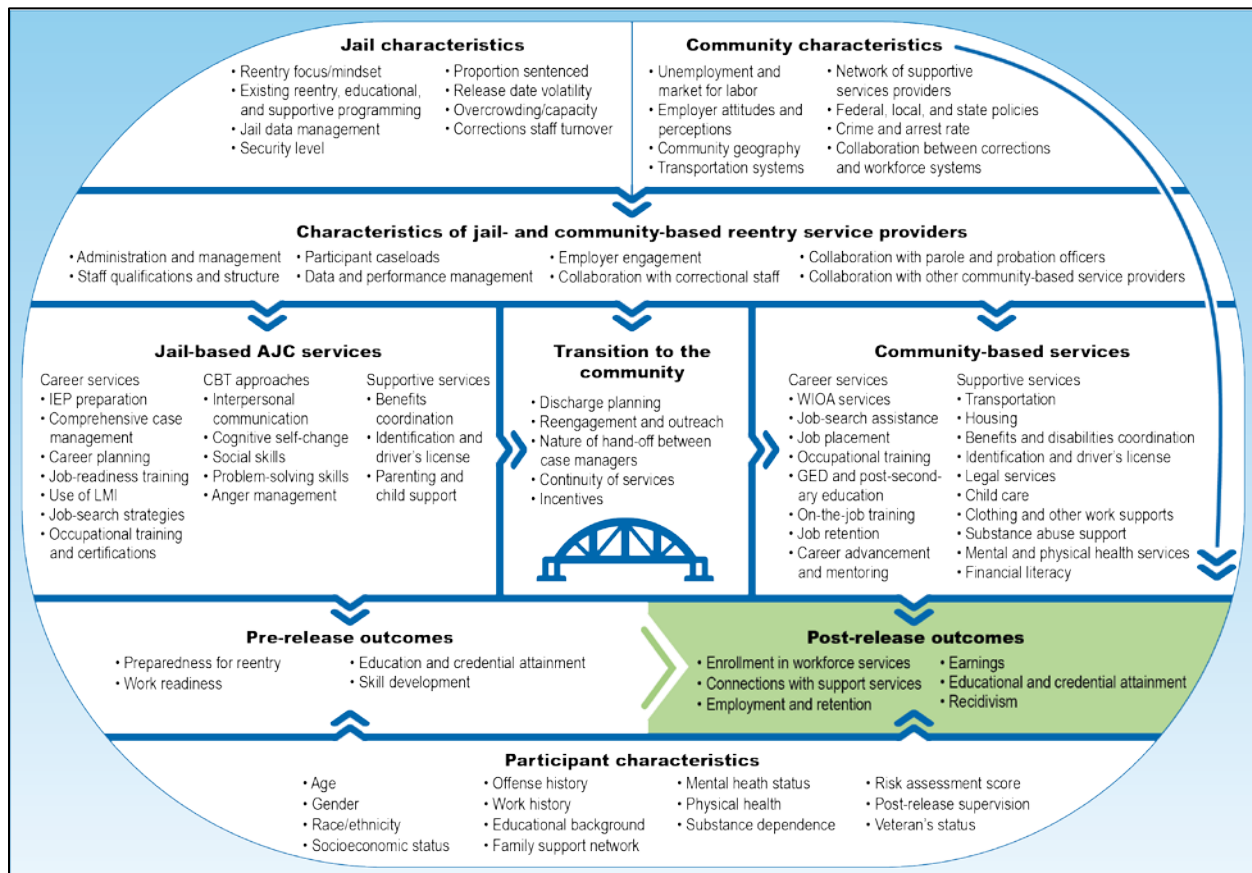
- A series of 5 early-planning issue briefs that explore lessons from the planning phase (first 9 months) of the LEAP grants.
- A series of 5 implementation issue briefs that explore lessons from the operation (last 15 months) of the grants.
- A compendium that presents a summary of findings from both the planning and implementation phases of the LEAP pilots, and includes the 10 issue briefs, organized around key themes.

These reports are available online at: <https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/CompletedStudies.htm>.

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<sup>1</sup> There were 20 grantees also referred to as "sites." There were a total of 22 county jails because two grantees worked with participants in more than one jail.

Figure ES.1. LEAP conceptual framework

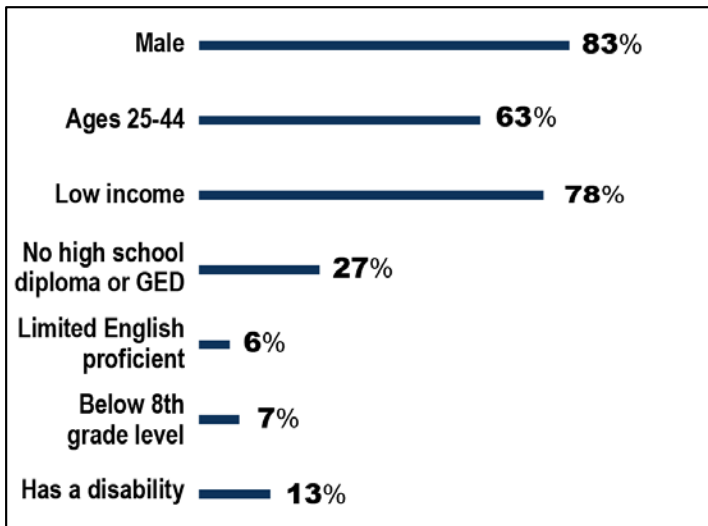


IEP = individual employment plan; LMI = labor market information; CBT = cognitive behavioral therapy; WIOA = Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

- **Close collaboration between the workforce agencies and the jails was crucial for successful implementation.** For many sites, the LEAP grant was the first opportunity for LWDBs to work with local corrections partners. Early, frequent, and ongoing communication helped bridge cultural differences and create buy-in among jail administrators and staff. Strong partnerships were also essential to gain jail approval and support for developing the jail-based AJCs, recruiting participants, delivering pre-release services, and planning for participants' transition as they approached release. Jail staff also helped workforce staff acculturate to the jail environment by serving as effective "translators" of jail culture for workforce partners.
- **The jail environment—including the jail layout, security level, and the degree to which jail staff were focused on reentry—shaped the physical spaces for services, and schedules of jail-based AJCs.** Although all 20 sites established jail-based AJC spaces, jail rules limited their ability to fully recreate the feel of and range of services available at a community-based AJC. Jail procedures also affected the schedule of services and the manner in which participants could move to and from the AJC. Fourteen of the 20 sites successfully worked with jails to configure Internet access and develop policies for safe Internet use in the AJC.

- **LEAP sites enrolled 3,805 individuals as of March 2018.** Although many sites faced challenges identifying eligible participants due to large unsentenced populations and lack of access to jail data, sites exceeded their enrollment target for pre-release participants by March 2018. The majority (83 percent) were men, ages 25 to 44, and low income (Figure ES.2).<sup>2</sup> About one-quarter (27 percent) did not have a high school diploma or GED, and approximately six percent had limited English proficiency.

Figure ES.2. Profile of LEAP participants



Source: Quarterly performance reports from 20 grantees as of March 31, 2018.

Note: Figure represents percentage of enrolled participants. N=3,805. Low income is defined as family income that is below 150 percent of the poverty level.

challenges, to support participants throughout these stages. Regardless of their approach, sites strove to offer a continuity of services in which participants were prepared to find work before release and then—after release—supported in their reentry process, job search, and employment.

- **Sites highlighted the need to remain flexible to adapt to changing jail conditions.** Jail-based AJC staff noted that day-to-day activities did not always unfold as expected. Certain participants would not show up on a given day, instruction periods were cut short or canceled due to security concerns or scheduling issues, and participants were sometimes released with little or no notice at all. Staff reported the importance of designing a service approach that took these uncertainties into account, including covering the most important content early during pre-release services and remaining willing and able to adjust to changing circumstances quickly.

Implementation experiences highlighted the importance of three distinct stages of service delivery—pre-release, transition, and post-release. As shown in the conceptual framework, the pre-release stage focused largely on preparing participants for work and other positive life outcomes. The transition stage was critical for discharge planning and reengagement in the community. Finally, the post-release stage aimed to provide a continuity of care to help participants with career and supportive services. Sites used different staffing approaches, each with benefits and

<sup>2</sup> Low income is defined as family income that is below 150 percent of the poverty level.

- **Pre-release participants appreciated being treated like AJC customers.** Participants noted the significance of being treated like an AJC customer—a job seeker rather than an inmate—while in the jail-based AJC. Staff and participants reported that the jail-based AJCs helped participants increase their confidence, understand and expand their skills, think beyond the jail walls, and feel like members of society deserving of employment.

**“The [jail-based AJC] class was trying to show me a lifestyle that was healthier and that I’m not used to. You don’t even know who you really are, or potential that you have, but they see it.”**

**“It’s a confidence builder. It encourages you. It lets you know it’s not over for you.... I didn’t know how to do a resume and I was worried about the job interview. But now I am going out there in a couple of weeks with a different mentality. I feel like I am going to succeed.”**

**“It’s not just about getting a job. It’s finding something that you like to do, that you want to do. And to me that right there, that’s the key thing from going back to doing everything else, and actually wanting to work.”**

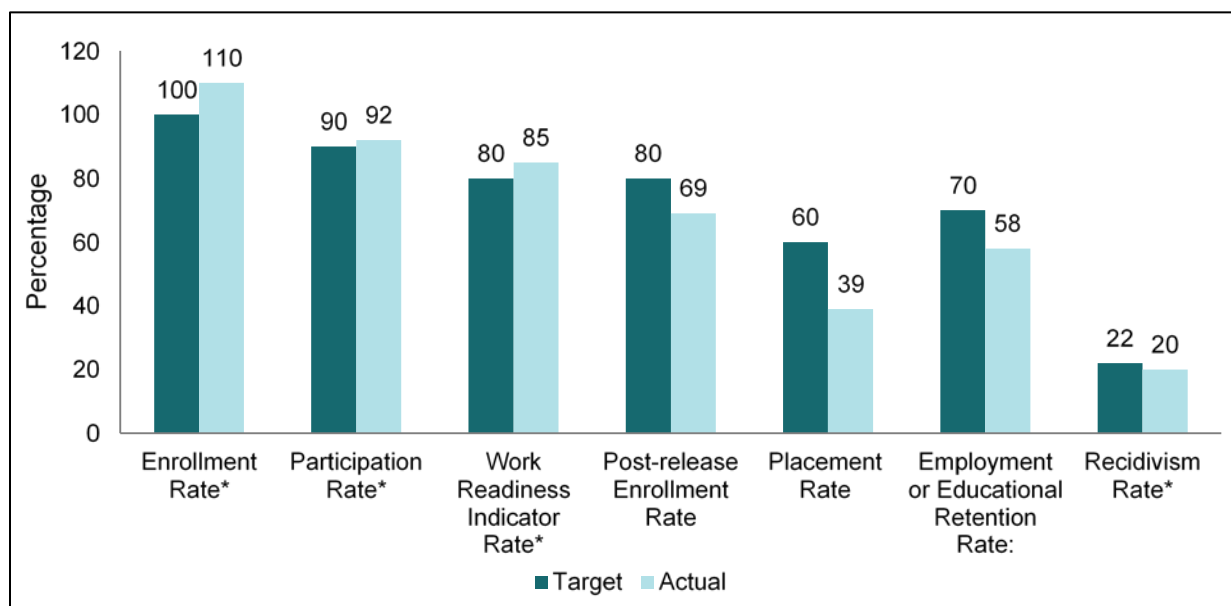
**“They go above and beyond. People have blinders on and focus just on one thing. When you take the blinders off, you see how much help is out there.”**

**“You got to think looking at my record...I don’t see that door open...and now the door is open for me to be somewhere with benefits, with longevity, with positions of advancement within the company and staying at the company.”**

*- LEAP participants describing their experiences with jail- and community-based AJC services*

- **Grantee performance reports indicated that most participants remained engaged while in the jail and were work ready at the time of release (Figure ES.3).** Sites reported that 92 percent of participants received at least one service each month before release. Work-readiness training was the most common service received, followed by workforce information services and career and life skills counseling. Sites reported that 85 percent of participants were work ready or had increases in work readiness by the time of release.

Figure ES.3. Key performance measures for LEAP grants



Source: Quarterly performance reports as of March 31, 2018.

Notes: \*Indicates that grantees met or exceeded the DOL target for that performance measure.

Definitions of performance measures are available in Appendix A. Sample sizes for enrollment and participation rates were 3,805 participants who ever enrolled in pre-release services; for work readiness, the sample included the 3,076 participants who were released from jail; for post release enrollment, the sample included the 1,936 participants who had been released for at least 30 days and had not enrolled in education or employment; for placement, the sample included the 2,682 participants who had been released for a quarter; for retention, the sample included the 734 participants who were placed in employment or education and had been released for at least three quarters; and for recidivism, the sample included the 1,115 participants who had been released for at least a year.

- Despite connecting pre-release with participants, sites struggled to engage participants after release.** Once released, participants had many competing demands, including parole and probation requirements, and staff often had poor contact information for them. Some participants left the local area, found jobs on their own, or did not think they needed help. To improve rates of post-release contact, staff increased participants' level of contact with community-based AJC staff before their release and provided incentives for participants who came to the community-based AJC. Sites also provided transportation assistance, coordinated with parole and probation agencies to avoid conflicts, or employed dedicated post-release outreach staff. Although just short of DOL's target of 80 percent, grantees were able to enroll 69 percent of participants who were not immediately placed in education or employment in career services in their first 30 days out of jail as of March 31, 2018.

- **In most sites, grantees required partnerships with more specialized service providers to deal with the significant challenges facing the reentry population.** Although sites

**“There’s the plan and there’s the reality of the lives of these guys. The reality is they get out and they maybe have \$50 and no ID. Getting them past the bus stop can be a challenge.”**

*- Community-based AJC staff describing the barriers participants face to engaging in*

noted the many benefits of having LWDBs lead the LEAP grants and provide employment services through jail-based AJCs, partnerships with other service providers helped grantees begin to address the full range of participant needs that were crucial for successful reentry. Lack of transportation and housing were the most frequently mentioned key barriers, but participants and staff also discussed the need for substance abuse and mental health counseling and treatment, legal support, registration for health care and public assistance, work clothing and supplies, help getting IDs, tuition assistance, and help filling out college applications.

- **Nearly 40 percent of participants found unsubsidized employment or participated in post-secondary education, occupational skills training, or Registered Apprenticeship in their first quarter after release (Figure ES.3).**

Staff interviews indicated that participants found jobs primarily in the service, manufacturing, construction, and warehousing industries because these employers are typically more willing to hire individuals with a history of incarceration. As context for this placement rate, focus group participants mentioned many barriers to employment, including probation requirements, distance to available jobs and lack of transportation, and a lack of stable or affordable housing. Staff also described the prevalence of mental health issues and substance abuse.

Both participants and staff indicated that many employers were also not always receptive or able to hire individuals with a criminal history. The placement rate varied considerably across sites from a high of 84 percent to a low of 2 percent. It also likely underreports actual placement given that sites were unable to track all participants over time, particularly those who did not engage in services after release. Of those reported as placed in employment or education, 58 percent had retained that placement three quarters after exit.

**“Individual passions make for strong partnerships. There’s an understanding that not one organization can provide the service – it takes a village. In order for us to provide effective assistance, it requires a lot of partners to come together.”**

*- LWDB leader on the importance of partnerships*

- **Of participants who had reached one year after release, 20 percent were rearrested for a new crime or were reincarcerated because their parole or probation was revoked (Figure ES.3).** This rate is less than half of the most recent estimate of 44 percent recidivism at the national level based on individuals released from prison (Alper, Durose, and Markman 2018), although it should be noted that jail and prison inmate populations may not be similar. Recidivism data should be interpreted with caution given that many participants had not yet reached a full year after release and the nature and quality of data that sites were able to gather on recidivism



varied substantially. In particular, some sites were only able to capture recidivism to the same facility or county. Many staff reported feeling that participants recidivated less often than the typical justice-involved individual, and that the majority of recidivism among participants stemmed from parole or probation violations rather than new charges.

### Conclusion and context for study findings

The LEAP pilots implemented innovative and groundbreaking approaches to providing pre-release services in jail-based AJCs and linking participants to post-release services upon release. All sites developed new jail-based AJCs within the nine-month planning period, and most were establishing new partnerships and services through that process. As context for the reported outcomes, the sites had only been serving participants for 16 to 24 months at the point when the final performance data were reported, with some participants still incarcerated. Many who had been released were still working toward key education and employment milestones that were only reported for the first quarter after release and had not yet received a full year of post-release services in the community.

**“If I can show it’s been successful, we can’t afford not to continue to fund it.”**

*- Jail administrator describing plans for sustaining the jail-based AJC after the grant ends*

Workforce development, corrections, and other partners, as well as participants, identified many successes along with significant challenges and promising strategies to address them. The qualitative evidence collected through this implementation evaluation suggests that introducing new services, partnerships, and ways of thinking about reentry hold promise for lasting effects on the workforce and corrections systems in some sites. The experiences of the LEAP grantees highlight important lessons learned and some areas for continued refinement or potential replication in similar or different contexts. Although this implementation evaluation cannot make causal claims, the evidence suggests that it is possible to use jail-based AJCs to link participants to post-release services and that this may be a promising approach to support returning individuals in successful reentry.

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