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How SNAP Can Better Serve the Formerly Incarcerated

By Elizabeth Wolkomir

Over 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons every year.¹ They reenter their communities with a set of complex needs and challenging vulnerabilities, including chronic physical and behavioral health conditions, unstable housing, and impediments to finding and retaining quality jobs. Many struggle to reintegrate and a large share are rearrested or reincarcerated within a few years of release.

Given the size of this population, its relative disadvantage, and its frequent concentration in poor communities, human services agencies have a key role to play in helping to support successful transition. Access to a robust set of supports can help individuals while they work to attain self-sufficiency and avoid rearrest and reincarceration. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) is a critical part of a reentry support infrastructure, providing basic food assistance and supplementing inadequate income. Additionally, robust and targeted interventions through the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program could mitigate the steep barriers to employment for some formerly incarcerated individuals.

Many state and local human services agencies are gaining a better understanding of the special challenges this population faces and are assessing how to support their transition back into their communities. This paper reviews some of those key challenges and recommends steps to better target SNAP policies and operations to help the formerly incarcerated.

Barriers to Successful Reentry: Complex Needs, Impediments to Employment, Codified Roadblocks

To reenter their communities successfully, individuals must navigate familial and community relationships; seek stable employment, secure housing, and treatment for physical and behavioral health conditions; and avoid future involvement in the criminal justice system. And for the many prisoners who are discharged to post-custody supervision, reentry also involves meeting the conditions of parole, which can include mandatory meetings with a parole officer, participation in

¹ E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2016," U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 2018, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>.

supervision programs, drug testing, and travel restrictions.² Some parolees may also have to obtain permission before changing residence or employment.³

Unfortunately, many individuals leaving prison have significant difficulty reintegrating and a large share have repeated contact with the criminal justice system. Though data on recidivism can be difficult to collect, a U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) study that looked at state prisoners released across 30 states estimated that approximately 68 percent were rearrested within three years of release and approximately 77 percent within five years of release.⁴ Of those rearrested within five years, about 55 percent were convicted of a new crime and roughly that same proportion returned to prison due to a new conviction or a violation of their terms of release.⁵

Health and human services agencies offer various programs that could address some of the needs of the formerly incarcerated, but these programs are not always designed with this population in mind.

Complex Needs of People Transitioning From Incarceration

Many formerly incarcerated people have a complex, multifaceted set of needs to address. Before entering prison, they were more likely than the general population to have experienced poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and poor health.⁶ Upon reentry, many of these challenges persist and can stand in the way of stability and self-sufficiency.

For example, the majority of returning individuals face serious health conditions.⁷ One study found that one-half of men and two-thirds of women had been diagnosed with chronic physical ailments such as asthma, diabetes, hepatitis, or HIV/AIDS.⁸ A large share also struggle with mental illness and substance abuse, both while incarcerated and after release, and treatment services are

² *Ibid.*

³ Prison Fellowship, “Probation and Parole Requirements,” <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/reentry-ministry/ministry-basics/probation-and-parole-requirements/>.

⁴ Matthew R. Durose *et al.*, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010,” U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 2014, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>. Arrest does not necessarily mean the individual was found guilty of the crime or sentenced to incarceration. Recidivism is often defined as rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration.

⁵ Durose *et al.*

⁶ National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, National Academies Press, 2014, <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/18613/the-growth-of-incarceration-in-the-united-states-exploring-causes>.

⁷ Ingrid A. Binswanger *et al.*, “Return to drug use and overdose after release from prison: a qualitative study of risk and protective factors,” *Addiction Science and Clinical Practice*, March 15, 2012, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3414824/>; Council of State Governments Justice Center, “Mental Health,” <https://csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/issue-areas/mental-health/>; Kamala Mallik-Kane and Christy A. Visser, “Health and Prisoner Reentry: How Physical, Mental, and Substance Abuse Conditions Shape the Process of Reintegration,” Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, February 2008, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/31491/411617-Health-and-Prisoner-Reentry.PDF>; National Research Council.

⁸ Mallik-Kane and Visser.

inadequate at both stages.⁹ People leaving jail and prison are three to six times likelier than others to suffer from mental illness, studies show.¹⁰ Furthermore, the formerly incarcerated have high rates of residential instability, which can include frequent relocation and periods of homelessness.¹¹ These issues can compound one another and make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to get back on their feet without appropriate services.

Impediments to Quality Employment

The formerly incarcerated also have a difficult time finding and retaining adequate employment. Several studies report that up to half may remain unemployed for as long as a year after their release.¹² Incarceration contributes to lower hourly wages and reduced annual earnings. Thus, the formerly incarcerated, like many other low-income workers,¹³ typically hold low-paying, insecure jobs and experience frequent periods of unemployment and high job turnover.¹⁴ Further, a history of incarceration is connected with flatter wages and less economic mobility over time.¹⁵

The stigma associated with having a criminal record can have a significant impact on an individual's ability to obtain work. Employers are often reluctant to hire the formerly incarcerated. While many populations face stigma in hiring practices, some evidence suggests that employers are more averse to hiring those with criminal convictions than any other disadvantaged group, including welfare recipients.¹⁶ And the intersection of race and criminal history can be doubly disadvantageous. Another study found that both being black and having a criminal history independently decreased the probability of being called back for a job interview; black individuals with criminal records had the lowest callback rates of the study population.¹⁷

Moreover, without additional training, formerly incarcerated individuals typically lack the education, training, and skills that employers seek. They have an average of fewer than 12 years of

⁹ Binswanger *et al.*; Mallik-Kane and Visser; Doris J. James and Lauren E. Glaze, "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates," U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2006, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/mhppji.pdf>; National Research Council.

¹⁰ Henry J. Steadman *et al.*, "Prevalence of Serious Mental Illness Among Jail Inmates," *Psychiatric Services*, June 2009, <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/ps.2009.60.6.761?code=ps-site>.

¹¹ Jocelyn Fontaine, "Examining Housing as a Pathway to Successful Reentry: A Demonstration Design Process," Urban Institute, November 2013, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/24206/412957-Examining-Housing-as-a-Pathway-to-Successful-Reentry-A-Demonstration-Design-Process.PDF>.

¹² National Research Council.

¹³ Brynne Keith-Jennings and Vincent Palacios, "SNAP Helps Millions of Low-Wage Workers," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 10, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-millions-of-low-wage-workers>.

¹⁴ Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, pp. 108-130; Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility," 2010, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf.

¹⁵ Western; Pew Charitable Trusts; Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach *et al.*, "Twelve Facts about Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry," Hamilton Project, October 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/thp_20161020_twelve_facts_incarceration_prisoner_reentry.pdf.

¹⁶ National Research Council.

¹⁷ Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology*, March 2003, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/pager/files/pager_ajs.pdf.

education and in many cases limited cognitive capacity, a history of behavioral problems, or a low level of functional literacy.¹⁸ Many also have little or no work experience.¹⁹

While incarcerated, people miss out on the opportunity to gain additional experience and build social networks that can beget work opportunities. Removed from the labor market, they lose potential work experience unless they engage in education, employment, or training while incarcerated. And prisoners likely do not develop the social connections and trust that often help others obtain employment and advancement in the labor market.²⁰

Also, after release individuals may have to navigate weak local labor markets, even if the national labor market is strengthening. Many come from and return to highly marginalized communities with elevated unemployment or low-paying, volatile jobs, which can adversely affect their prospects for successful transition.²¹ These underserved communities also may lack sufficient social services that could help those reentering get healthy, become work ready, and avoid a return to illicit activity.²²

Restrictions Imposed on People With Criminal Records

Even after those with convictions fulfill their sentences, their criminal records can confer far-reaching penalties for many years — and, in some cases, for life— that can make it difficult to find work and become self-sufficient.

A set of legal and regulatory restrictions referred to as collateral consequences limit people with criminal records from engaging in a wide range of activities, which in some states include voting, participating in public benefits programs, and acquiring certain jobs and occupational licenses. According to the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center’s National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Conviction, there are over 47,000 collateral consequences imposed by state and federal law.²³

Specifically, restrictions on employment and occupational licensing can create a serious barrier to finding high-quality jobs, particularly in industries that offer promotion potential or increased earnings over time. In addition, certain restrictions on public housing programs can make it challenging for those without familial support to find stable, affordable housing. While some restrictions are appropriate and in the public interest, others make it unnecessarily difficult for those with records to get and retain employment, which could increase the risks of economic instability and recidivism.

¹⁸ National Research Council.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Western, pp. 112-114.

²¹ National Research Council.

²² Jeffrey D. Morenoff and David J. Harding, “Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4231529>.

²³ Art Beeler, “Reentry efforts undermined by collateral consequences,” Collateral Consequences Resource Center, March 24, 2016, <http://ccresourcecenter.org/2016/03/24/collateral-consequences-undermine-reentry-efforts/>; Council of State Government Justice Center, “National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Conviction,” <https://niccc.csjusticecenter.org/>.

Overview of Incarceration and Reentry Patterns in the United States

The U.S. prisoner population exceeds 1.5 million, making it slightly larger than the total population of Hawaii.^a Nearly 7 million people are in prison or jail or on probation or parole, comprising 1 in every 37 U.S. adult residents.^b

The expansion of incarceration in recent decades, which has seen a very modest reversal in the last few years, disproportionately affected certain demographic groups. The overwhelming majority (about 93 percent) of sentenced individuals in state and federal prisons are male.^c And sentenced prisoners are disproportionately minorities: about 33 percent of the adult prison population is black and about 23 percent is Latino, compared to about 12 percent and 18 percent, respectively, of the total U.S. population.^d Low educational attainment further compounds the likelihood of incarceration. A 2010 study found that black men between ages 20 and 34 without a GED or high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated than employed.^e

The large size of the correctional system results in a correspondingly large number of individuals transitioning out of incarceration each year. Over 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons annually — more than 1,600 every day.^f Reentry patterns are geographically concentrated, disproportionately affecting certain counties, cities, and neighborhoods.^g For example, one study found that half of the prisoners released under parole in Michigan in 2003 were concentrated in 12 percent of the state's census tracts, and one-quarter in just 2 percent of the tracts.^h Areas with the highest rates of incarceration (and thus reentry) tend already to be severely disadvantaged; many struggle with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and racial segregation.ⁱ Poor urban communities, in particular, have disproportionately large populations of newly released individuals and residents under correctional supervision. As a result of this geographic concentration, people living in some low-income communities in the country are as likely to touch the criminal justice system as the education system or the labor market.

^a E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2016," U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 2018, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population as of July 1, 2017.

^b Danielle Kaeble and Lauren Glaze, "Correctional Populations in the United States," U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2016, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus15.pdf>; for definitions of jail, prison, probation and parole see <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=qa&iid=322>; <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=qa&iid=324>.

^c Carson. Sentenced prisoners comprise state and federal prison inmates who have been sentenced to more than a year of incarceration.

^d Carson.

^e Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility," 2010, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1pdf.pdf.

^f Carson.

^g National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, National Academies Press, 2014, <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/18613/the-growth-of-incarceration-in-the-united-states-exploring-causes>.

^h Jeffrey D. Morenoff and David J. Harding, "Final Technical Report: Neighborhoods, Recidivism, and Employment Among Returning Prisoners," National Institute of Justice, October 14, 2011, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/236436.pdf>.

ⁱ National Research Council.

^j National Research Council; Jeffrey D. Morenoff and David J. Harding, "Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities," *Annual Review of Sociology*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4231529/>.

^k Morenoff and Harding, "Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities."

One pertinent example is the federal rule permanently disqualifying individuals with a felony drug conviction from basic food and cash assistance through SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),²⁴ even though these benefits could help many formerly incarcerated individuals get back on their feet, support their families, and lessen their chances of returning to illicit activity as a means to obtain food and meet basic needs. Fortunately, states can opt out of or modify the ban, and many have. Twenty-two states have modified the ban, some by mandating that applicants with drug felony convictions submit to a drug test as a condition of receiving SNAP. Twenty-three states plus Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Virgin Islands have lifted the ban entirely. Currently, four states and Guam still have a full ban in place.²⁵ (See Appendix.)

SNAP's Role in Supporting Reentry: Special Considerations for Serving the Formerly Incarcerated

Given the size of the reentering population and the importance — for the formerly incarcerated themselves as well as their families and communities — of a successful transition, policymakers have a strong incentive to promote policies that encourage social and economic reintegration.

In conjunction with critical social services, access to basic supports like food assistance could help this population attain self-sufficiency and avoid reengagement with the criminal justice system. SNAP can be a key part of a reentry support infrastructure, providing basic food assistance and supplementing inadequate income. SNAP is especially important in states where low-income individuals do not have access to other help — for example, in states that have not adopted the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion and may not provide health coverage or other key supports to low-income adults. Additionally, targeted services through the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program could mitigate some of the steep barriers to employment that formerly incarcerated persons face.

To best serve this vulnerable population, SNAP agencies may want to assess their program delivery and design as well as certain policies through the lens of how they affect formerly incarcerated individuals. Policies that merit consideration include those that (1) promote streamlined, timely access to benefits for individuals who are leaving incarceration and particularly vulnerable; (2) enable these individuals to participate in E&T activities that build employable skills, mitigate impediments to work, and take into account the consequences of incarceration and conditions of parole; and (3) remove eligibility limitations for the formerly incarcerated. The checklist below, for state and local SNAP agencies to consider, briefly describes these and other constructive policies.

✓ Ease and expedite access to SNAP benefits.

Though each state is different, individuals are often released from prison with no more than a small stipend or “gate money” (which can range from about \$10 to a couple hundred dollars), a bus

²⁴ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 § 115.

²⁵ Based on CBPP tracking of recent state legislation and Food and Nutrition Service, “State Options Report: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, revised August 15, 2017, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/13-State_Options-revised.pdf. In March 2018, Indiana passed legislation to modify the ban, making individuals with drug felony convictions eligible for SNAP contingent on complying with terms of probation, parole, community corrections, or reentry court programs. The law will go into effect January 1, 2020.

or train ticket, a set of clothes, and the personal property with which they were admitted.²⁶ And research shows that former prisoners are especially vulnerable immediately after release. A study in Washington State demonstrated that former prisoners experience elevated mortality rates in the first two weeks after release.²⁷ Furthermore, the risk of recidivism is highest soon after release and diminishes over time.²⁸ Therefore, prompt access to help meeting basic needs like adequate nutrition — in addition to social services — is critical.

Early access to fundamental supports, such as food, may mitigate the risk of rearrest or reincarceration. Federal SNAP rules require that states process applications within 30 days of an individual filing the request (and within 7 days for those eligible for emergency processing). For individuals with no means to meet their basic food needs, this can seem like a lifetime.

Several state SNAP agencies have identified this issue as a concern and have undertaken efforts to allow incarcerated prisoners to apply for SNAP *prior* to release so that benefits can be available as of the date they leave prison. For example, New York City and South Dakota accept and process SNAP applications filed by prisoners approaching their date of release.²⁹ The knowledge that they have access to food upon release could help reassure individuals and allow them to focus on other priorities, such as parole requirements and employment.

States that pursue pre-release application should carefully consider and test the most effective processes for incarcerated individuals not only to file applications, but also to complete certification interviews and access their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards upon release. As discussed above, newly released individuals must immediately navigate a number of logistical issues, which can include reporting to a parole office and identifying shelter; the processes of completing the interview and accessing EBT benefits should take these competing demands into consideration. Ideally, a person could access his or her benefits on the day of release.

In the absence of pre-release enrollment, some states are forging partnerships to provide application assistance in prisons or soon after release to help individuals gain expedited access to SNAP benefits upon reentry. For example, the Ohio Benefit Bank and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction have a statewide partnership to provide SNAP clinics and application assistance for soon-to-be released individuals in more than 20 prisons. SNAP outreach organizations could also consider partnering with probation and parole agencies or local reentry providers to conduct targeted outreach to people who have been recently released.

²⁶ American Radio Works, “Hard Time Life After Prison – Gate Money by State,” March 2003, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/hardtime/gatemoney/index.html>; Kate J. Wilson, “State Policies and Procedures Regarding ‘Gate Money,’” Center for Public Policy Research, University of California, Davis, October 2007, http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Adult_Research_Branch/Research_Documents/Gate_Money_Oct_2007.pdf.

²⁷ Schanzenbach *et al.*; Ingrid A. Bingswanger *et al.*, “Release from Prison – A High Risk of Death for Former Inmates,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, January 11, 2007, <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa064115#t=article>.

²⁸ Matthew R. Durose *et al.*, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010,” U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 2014, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>.

²⁹ Food and Nutrition Service, “Waiver of Rules,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, January 19, 2018, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers-rules>; South Dakota Department of Social Services, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Manual,” <https://dss.sd.gov/docs/economicassistance/snap/manual/snapmanual.pdf>.

✓ **Target meaningful employment and training interventions to the formerly incarcerated who face barriers to employment.**

Formerly incarcerated individuals often identify employment as one of the most important issues in transitioning back into the community and avoiding future criminal activity.³⁰ However, many face multifaceted barriers to employment, particularly with regard to quality work with potential for future earnings growth. For those with limited education, scant work experience, and weak professional skills, leveraging SNAP's E&T program to provide robust services could help them get on a path to sustainable employment.

States and counties interested in developing E&T initiatives to serve individuals with criminal records should ensure that contracts require providers to accommodate the particular needs of this population.³¹ To be meaningful, E&T interventions need to take into consideration the many restrictions on people with criminal records from obtaining occupational licensures and certain types of employment and must focus on practical training and skill-building for the kinds of jobs available to this population. Generalized job search requirements that might mandate that these individuals contact hundreds of employers who would never consider hiring someone with a criminal record would likely prove futile and demoralizing.

Further, to combat stagnant wages over time and promote economic mobility, E&T can seek to help people move into industries with the potential for future advancement, building on any education, training, or employment that individuals may have attained while incarcerated. States may want to consider collaborating with community-based non-profit programs that specialize in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals. For example, several states have forged partnerships with the Center for Employment Opportunities — a non-profit provider of employment services exclusively for individuals with criminal records — to leverage SNAP E&T funds and serve more of the formerly incarcerated.³²

✓ **Eliminate eligibility barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals.**

One of SNAP's harshest rules limits unemployed individuals aged 18 to 50 not living with children to three months of SNAP benefits in any 36-month period when they aren't employed or in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week. This rule can be particularly harmful for people who have been incarcerated, since they face steep barriers to employment and may need more than three months to find a job or may have conflicts (including parole requirements) that can get in the way of the 20-hour requirement.

The rule, implemented as part of the 1996 welfare law, does not obligate states to offer all individuals a work or training program slot, and most do not. SNAP recipients' benefits are cut off after three months irrespective of whether they are searching diligently for a job or willing to

³⁰ Nathan James, "Offender Reentry: Correctional Statistics, Reintegration in the Community, and Recidivism," Congressional Research Service, January 12, 2015, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34287.pdf>.

³¹ CSG Justice Center maintains the What Works in Reentry Clearinghouse (<https://whatworks.csgjusticecenter.org/>), which serves as a one-stop shop for research on the effectiveness of reentry programs and practices, including in the areas of education and employment. The tool rates the evidence of different interventions' effect on outcomes such as work and recidivism.

³² For more information on the Center for Employment Opportunities' work, see <https://ceoworks.org/about/>.

participate in a qualifying work or job training program. As a result, this rule is a time limit on benefits and not (as its supporters sometimes describe it) a work requirement.

However, the law allows states to seek waivers from the Agriculture Department (USDA) to temporarily suspend the three-month limit for individuals in areas with insufficient jobs.³³ Since many formerly incarcerated individuals live in areas with high unemployment or a weak job market, this waiver authority is a critical tool that states can use to exempt this vulnerable population in waivable areas.

Federal law also lets a state exempt a limited number of *individuals* from the time limit. States have discretion to define the exempt group. In non-waivable areas, states can use this to exempt formerly incarcerated individuals from the time limit, allowing them to maintain basic food assistance while they look for sustainable work. One approach would be to exempt individuals participating in any employment and training program that is suited to the needs of this population.

Even if a state waives all eligible areas, the areas qualifying for waivers can change each year as local unemployment rates shift. State SNAP agencies should stay in touch with community organizations that serve the formerly incarcerated to keep them abreast of any such changes. These organizations may need to shift their services to provide food assistance if the time limit returns in one of their service areas. Conversely, they would likely want to help their clients apply for benefits if the time limit was newly suspended.

Further, individuals with drug felony convictions are wholly ineligible for SNAP benefits in several states and face special eligibility restrictions in many other states. Blocking the formerly incarcerated from basic nutrition assistance after they have served their debt to society is a form of extended punishment, which leaves them more vulnerable to food insecurity and may put them at risk of returning to illicit activity to meet their basic needs. Some research suggests that full eligibility for SNAP may significantly reduce the risk of recidivism for newly released people with drug offense convictions.³⁴ Eliminating such bans and restrictions could help them afford a healthy diet and use their minimal resources to meet other basic needs.

✓ **Accommodate parole requirements.**

Many applicants for public benefits must juggle busy schedules and competing priorities, which may include work, child care, limited transportation, and appointments with multiple health and human services agencies. Most former prisoners must not only navigate these challenges but also meet parole requirements. Since the latter can mean the difference between staying free and returning to prison, individuals almost always will prioritize them over requirements to qualify for or continue receiving public assistance.

SNAP agencies can improve access to food assistance by adopting policies for appointments and interviews that recognize the competing demands of parole compliance. This could mean allowing applicants to have on-demand certification interviews instead of pre-scheduled interviews. State

³³ Ed Bolen and Stacy Dean, “Waivers Add Key State Flexibility to SNAP’s Three-Month Time Limit,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated February 6, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/waivers-add-key-state-flexibility-to-snaps-three-month-time-limit>.

³⁴ Crystal S. Yang, “Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?” *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings* 2017, May 2017, http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/olin_center/papers/pdf/Yang_920.pdf.

options and waivers that streamline application, enrollment, and recertification — for example, simplified reporting and telephone interviews — would also benefit this population.

Also, for formerly incarcerated individuals enrolled in E&T programs, states can consider if any of their mandated parole activities (e.g., required classes) are also qualified E&T activities that contribute to job readiness and therefore should count toward the 20-hour minimum for individuals subject to the three-month limit or toward mandatory E&T participation in states with those requirements.

✓ **Seize opportunities to test and learn.**

Many people transitioning from prison fall through the cracks, unable to get the basic assistance they need, find pathways to work, and avoid recidivism. Our knowledge about what works to facilitate successful reentry is still limited. Whether in the context of providing SNAP benefits or E&T services, state and local SNAP agencies should test and evaluate new policies, procedures, and interventions when possible. Though funding limitations can often place rigorous impact evaluations out of reach, agencies can design process and outcome assessments to learn how to better serve formerly incarcerated individuals, and then share those findings.

✓ **Review data regarding the formerly incarcerated population in your state or area.**

Prisoner reentry is highly concentrated both among demographic groups and among geographic areas, as noted above. Understanding the size, composition, and distribution of the formerly incarcerated population in a given area (where such data exist) can help state and county agencies make better policy and programmatic decisions. For example, a state or county interested in helping eligible formerly incarcerated persons apply for SNAP may decide to target outreach in areas with high rates of prisoner release. Or SNAP agencies may consider providing training — perhaps in partnership with a local reentry agency — to front-line SNAP workers who likely work with the formerly incarcerated population and their families.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics publishes annual data by state on prison admissions and releases. Some states track and publish more granular information about releases, disaggregated by county or sub-region and demographics. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections' Prison Release Dashboard disaggregates releases by country, race, age, and sex.³⁵ If this information is not readily accessible, state and county SNAP agencies can contact their state or local corrections departments to inquire about its availability.

³⁵ State of Wisconsin Department of Corrections, "DAI Prison Releases Dashboard," <https://doc.wi.gov/Pages/DataResearch/PrisonReleases.aspx>.

✓ **Ensure that SNAP and other human services are part of the broader reentry dialogue.**

Like other highly disadvantaged groups, former prisoners transitioning back into society have complex, multi-layered needs. Effectively serving this population and thinking comprehensively about reentry policy require coordination among a range of stakeholders and service providers.

In some areas, this coordination is done through formalized mechanisms that bring relevant voices to the table. For example, in Washington State's King County, the regional Community Partnerships for Transition Solutions (CPTS) partner with government agencies, non-profits, and service providers to advance initiatives that support adults transitioning from incarceration; the state SNAP agency is among the CPTS partners.³⁶

Ensuring that SNAP and other human services agencies are represented in these forums can help advance policies that best serve the formerly incarcerated and take into account the infrastructure of the human services system. SNAP and human services agencies can ask to participate in existing bodies dedicated to improving transition from prison. Where formal mechanisms for coordination are absent, forging partnerships with the corrections, probation and parole, and reentry communities can improve SNAP agencies' understanding of the barriers to reentry in their areas and spur policy improvements.

³⁶ King County Community Partnership for Transition Solutions, <http://www.kccpts.org/>.

Appendix: State-by-State Status of SNAP Ban on Drug Felons³⁷

Lifetime Ban

Guam
Indiana*
Mississippi
South Carolina
West Virginia

Modified Ban

Alabama
Alaska
Arizona
Colorado
Connecticut
Florida
Hawaii
Idaho
Kansas
Kentucky
Maryland
Michigan
Minnesota
Missouri
Montana
Nebraska
Nevada
North Carolina
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Virginia
Wisconsin

No Ban

Arkansas
California
Delaware
District of Columbia
Georgia
Illinois
Iowa
Louisiana
Maine
Massachusetts
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Dakota
U.S. Virgin Islands
Vermont
Washington
Wyoming

³⁷ Based on CBPP tracking of recent state legislation and Food and Nutrition Service, “State Options Report: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, revised August 15, 2017, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/13-State_Options-revised.pdf.

* In March 2018, Indiana passed legislation to modify the ban, making individuals with drug felony convictions eligible for SNAP contingent on complying with terms of probation, parole, community corrections, or reentry court programs. The law will go into effect January 1, 2020.