Leveraging Technology to Support Prisoner Reentry

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High recidivism rates among justice-involved individuals are a persistent challenge for the corrections sector, and this challenge incurs significant costs to these individuals, their victims, their communities, and the larger society. Therefore, preparing these individuals for successful reentry into the community and long-term desistance from crime is a critical mission of corrections agencies and their community-based partners. To accomplish this, corrections agencies and their partners typically employ a variety of supervision services and programs to address common need areas (e.g., vocational needs, educational needs, family reunification, substance use, mental health, housing), with a focus on the individual's criminogenic factors (i.e., factors associated with an increased likelihood of reoffending). The corrections sector is increasingly leveraging technology-based solutions to deliver and/or augment these services. This trend has been accelerated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has forced agencies to lean heavily on technology to deliver a wide variety of treatment and supervision services remotely. Furthermore, corrections agencies and their partners are recognizing that returning citizens need access to technology at each stage of the reentry process; however, these agencies also need to minimize associated security risks. This is critical to both providing access to relevant programming content and helping individuals become familiar and proficient with the technology necessary to function in today's world.

Common barriers to using these technologies include cost, staffing requirements to implement technology solutions, scalability, and challenges associated with information-sharing and collaboration between public and private entities engaged in reentry. Furthermore, correctional institutions can be risk averse and might prioritize security above rehabilitative objectives. Naturally, they might be cautious about such innovations as allowing incarcerated individuals access to technology and the internet for programming purposes.

SELECTED PRIORITY NEEDS

RESULTS

Organizational issues

- Implementation guides and best practices for the use of secure tablets should be developed that consider agency objectives (e.g., primarily entertainment or programming), the pros and cons of different funding models, and security issues.

Programming

- Agencies should explore the feasibility of developing a publicly funded, national repository of corrections-specific VR content that is accessible to agencies at no or low cost.

Transitional services

- Best practices and collaboration strategies should be developed for information-sharing solutions that connect relevant agencies within and across states so institutions can apply for and secure IDs prior to release.

Coordination and continuity of care

- Implementation guides should be developed that highlight effective strategies for obtaining funding to establish automated solutions to support coordinated reentry case management; this would allow partner access to essential and timely information across domains, including assessments, case plans, contacts and interactions, program referrals, progress in programming or supervision, status, and outcomes.

Equity issues

- Best practices and effective strategies should be developed for ensuring inclusivity; these strategies should account for diversity among both service providers and the target population (e.g., individuals with disabilities, non-English speakers, cultural differences, access to and ability to pay for technology).

To explore how technology can be better leveraged to improve reentry outcomes, the National Institute of Justice, supported by the RAND Corporation in partnership with the University of Denver, hosted a virtual workshop in March 2021. The workshop brought together a group of prison, jail, and probation and parole administrators; community-based service providers; researchers; and other experts to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with this topic.

The project team used a structured brainstorming approach to develop a set of *needs*, which is a term we use to describe a specific requirement tied to either solving a problem or taking advantage of an opportunity to better address a challenge. This report, which describes these needs, is part of an ongoing series of reports on workshops facilitated by the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative. These results are pertinent to a wide variety of audiences, including corrections practitioners and their community-based partners, technology developers, the research community, and organizations that fund research.

Institutions need guidance to better leverage technology to train incarcerated individuals for high-demand jobs; implement tablet programs; and incorporate such technologies as video visitation and virtual reality.

WHAT WE FOUND

Workshop participants identified and prioritized 37 individual needs. Eleven needs were ranked as high priority. Among the high-priority needs, the following themes emerged:

- The participants identified several examples of the effective use of technology to support reentry. They noted, however, that broader adoption would be facilitated by improved guidance in the form of case studies, best practices, and demonstrated effective strategies. For example, institutions need guidance to better leverage technology to train incarcerated individuals for high-demand jobs; implement tablet programs; and incorporate such technologies as video visitation and virtual reality (VR) into family reunification efforts. Correctional agencies also require guidance to effectively collaborate with relevant agencies to provide incarcerated individuals with documentation of identification prior to release. The participants recommended the development of incentives and implementation guidance to support automated solutions for coordinated reentry case management and data-sharing across justice agencies and their community-based partners. Finally, all stakeholders, including private industry, need guidance to help ensure that innovations are designed and implemented with inclusivity in mind so as not to disadvantage any group.

- Recognizing the power of evidence, the participants called for research and evaluation to establish the efficacy of technology-facilitated reentry initiatives and their impact on key outcomes. Participants recommended studies to evaluate the impact of telepresence technologies on individual and group interventions and studies on "in-reach" activities. Furthermore, research is needed to quantify the impact of access to advanced technology on correctional education outcomes.

- The participants noted the potential of VR to significantly improve programming in a variety of areas (e.g., vocational skills, interviewing and other life skills, treatment). Wider adoption of VR could be fostered by the development of pilot programs and evaluation research to identify (1) best practices for content development and implementation in correctional settings and (2) the impact of VR-based interventions on key outcomes. Relatedly, the participants called for exploration of the feasibility of a publicly funded library of VR content that could be easily accessed by the corrections sector.

About This Report

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, the RAND Corporation, in partnership with the Police Executive Research Forum, RTI International, and the University of Denver, is carrying out a research effort to assess and prioritize technology and related needs across the criminal justice community. This research effort, called the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative (PCJNI), is a component of the Criminal Justice Requirements and Resources Consortium (RRC) and is intended to support innovation within the criminal justice enterprise. For more information about the RRC and the PCJNI, please see www.rand.org/well-being/justice-policy/projects/priority-criminal-justice-needs.

This report is one product of that effort. In March 2021, RAND Corporation researchers and University of Denver staff conducted an expert workshop on leveraging technology to support prisoner reentry. The workshop was convened to identify high-priority technology needs for improving reentry outcomes. This report presents the proceedings of that workshop, topics considered, needs that the workshop participants developed, and overarching themes that emerged from the discussion. This report should be of interest to correctional administrators, reentry services providers, technology providers, and the research community. Other RAND research reports from the PCJNI that might be of interest are

- Joe Russo, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, and Brian A. Jackson, *Community Supervision in a Digital World: Challenges and Opportunities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A108-10, 2021
- Joe Russo, Dulani Woods, George B. Drake, and Brian A. Jackson, *Leveraging Technology to Enhance Community Supervision: Identifying Needs to Address Current and Emerging Concerns*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3213-NIJ, 2019
- Joe Russo, Dulani Woods, John S. Shaffer, and Brian A. Jackson, *Countering Threats to Correctional Institutional Security: Identifying Innovation Needs to Address Current and Emerging Concerns*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2933-NIJ, 2019.

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