



# Getting Offenders Back to Work: Innovative Policies with Clear Results

# The Cicero Institute

The Cicero Institute is **an onpartisan group of policy innovators** with deep experience in government, research, technology, and entrepreneurship. We fight for policies that apply the principles of a free society to solve problems at the state level.

Cicero policies are grounded in the **principles of transparency, good incentives, and accountability**—all hallmarks of a functional system.

The details and results of a policy should be **transparent to the public**; public institutions should be **incentivized toward solving problems** instead of perpetuating them; and those institutions must be **accountable to the public**.

More Former Offenders in Stable  
Jobs = Lower Crime

**Here's how we get there.**

# More Workers, Fewer Criminals

The research is consistent: employment is the leading indicator of successful re-entry and desistance from crime. Here are a few highlights from studies nationwide:

## U.S. Department of Justice

- A study of trends in probation populations found that **8 in 10 people who fail to complete probation are unemployed.**

## Missouri Department of Corrections

- A study found that having a job—even sporadically—**reduced the chances** of an offender returning to prison **by 66 percent.**

# Many programs... Few that actually work

There are many strategies to assist people coming out of the criminal justice system obtain lawful, stable jobs.

Communities across Wisconsin probably utilize variations of the following approaches:

- In-prison credentialing programs
- Income-share Agreements
- Job coaching
- Professional training
- Church networks
- Partnerships with employers
- Partnerships with community colleges
- Interview Preparation

But studies consistently show that **particular programs do not scale**. A strategy or program that works in one county rarely works in another. **One-size-fits-all approaches simply won't work**.

# Incentives Matter:

Policies intended to boost employment only matter if:

**(1) offenders buy into them and (2) programs produce positive results.**

# The Importance of Incentives

Do incentives really make a difference? Yes.

## Offenders

- A University of Utah study found that 70 percent of probationers were **motivated by incentives** to work harder towards re-entry.
- Other studies found that the **most compelling incentives** for probationers are, in order:
  - (1) time off of supervision term;
  - (2) reductions in fines and fees; and
  - (3) fewer check-ins.

## Officers

- A University of Wisconsin—Madison study found that **36 percent of probation officers were apathetic** about their roles.
  - The top-cited reason was that the system **does not reward hard work** .
- A Southern Illinois University study found that **performance incentives** for probation departments led to nearly **9 in 10 offenders** viewing **probation as helpful and rehabilitative** .

# The Importance of Incentives

*Incentives for probation departments and programs: A tale of two policies*

## Parole Supervision and Reintegration Model:

- California **mandated** its parole departments to adopt a set of “evidence-based” recommendations.
  - A follow-up study showed that departments that adopted the changes **performed no better than departments who refused to change.**

## Performance Incentive Funding:

- Learning from **a successful policy in Texas** California took a different approach to probation: probation departments that **improved key metrics** like criminal violations and employment rates were **rewarded with additional funding** .
  - Statewide, 53 out of 58 counties improved
  - Orange County saw a **69% increase in offender employment rates** and a 14%

*decrease in new crimes on probation*

# Incentives Matter:

Effective policies reward stakeholders for achieving the intended outcomes of those policies. In this case, policies should:

- (1) **reward people** in the criminal justice system who actively seek and hold lawful employment (buy-in)
- (2) **reward programs** that measurably improve employment outcomes for offenders (accountability)

# Policy Proposals:

Work for Time Credits and  
Performance Incentive Funding

# Work for Time Credits

The concept of “work for time credits” is straightforward: **reward the people who get stable, lawful jobs with modest reductions in their total supervision term.**

## Kentucky’s Approach:

- A probationer can **earn one day off of his supervision term for every completed 40 - hour work week**
- Similar to “earned time credit” systems in Missouri and South Carolina
- Pew’s analysis of Missouri’s system found that **earned** reductions does not increase crime

## Florida’s Approach:

- A probationer can **earn 30 days off of his supervision term for 6 months of employment** and an additional 60 days for earning a GED, vocational certificate, or degree

# Performance Incentive Funding

At the core of “performance incentive funding” is the idea that the government should fund *outcomes* instead of particular strategies or programs. Funds should flow to the best ideas and away from ideas that fail to improve key outcomes. This approach fosters innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness.

## Utah

- Adopted in 2021, Utah rewards Adult Probation and Parole regional offices with \$2,500 in discretionary funding for:
  - each probationer employed above the baseline employment rate for that region’s caseload
  - each probationer employed for at least the last six months of his probation term

Other states with versions of performance incentive funding include Arizona (2008–10, 2020–present); California (2008–2015); Kansas (grants, 2007); Illinois (opt-in, 2009–present); Ohio (grants, 2012–2016); and Texas (grants, 2003).

# Key Takeaways

A good, systemslevel approach to getting people out of lives of crime and into lawful jobs requires **the right incentives**:

- **Reward people** for obtaining and keeping employment
- **Reward probation and parole departments** for helping the people on their caseloads find work