



# **Improving Long-Term Employment Outcomes:** Promising Findings from New York State



**Center for  
Employment  
Opportunities**

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The Center for Employment Opportunities' vision is that anyone with a recent criminal history who wants to work has the preparation and support needed to find a job and to stay connected to the labor force.



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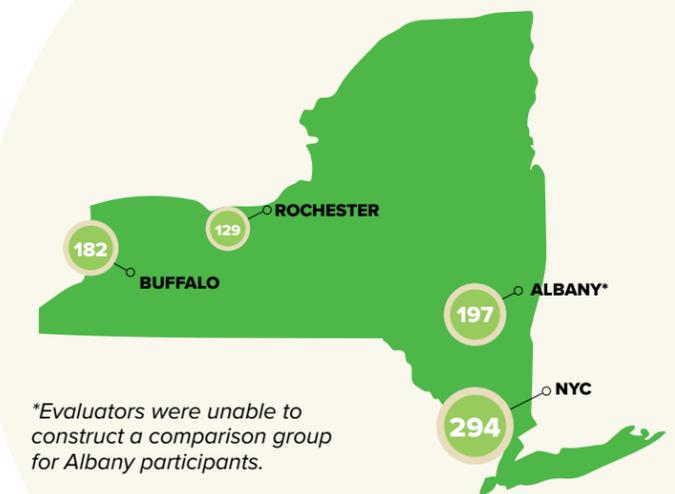
## CEO's Focus: Skills to Succeed in the Workforce

People returning home from incarceration experience numerous barriers that hinder their ability to lead productive lives, with unemployment being one of the most common challenges. Research shows that only 55 percent of returning citizens reported any earnings in the first full calendar year after their release, with the median earnings being \$10,090.<sup>1</sup> Individuals who were formerly incarcerated often lack the education and job skills necessary to succeed in the workforce and will grapple with chronic unemployment.<sup>2</sup> CEO's evidence-based program addresses this skills gap by providing immediate employment, training, and support services that enable people to find employment and earn income after their release from prison or jail.

## CEO's Approach

CEO's Theory of Change posits that immediate access to employment for individuals who have recently returned home from incarceration will reduce recidivism and improve their long-term connection to the workforce. Enrolled participants complete a one-week orientation and then begin a short-term "transitional job" working up to 4 days a week on a CEO work crew where they earn daily pay. Participants work with Job Coaches 1-2 days/week to develop skills and prepare for the job application and interview process. Once assessed as "Job Start Ready," participants meet with Job Developers to find full time unsubsidized employment. Once placed in a job, they work for the next year with a CEO Retention Specialist who helps each participant retain employment and develop additional job skills. CEO is focused on two key outcomes: reducing recidivism and increasing work skills that lead to long term employment.

## Number of CEO participants included in the DCJS evaluation



<sup>1</sup> Adam Looney and Nicholas Tuner, "Work and opportunity before and after incarceration," Brookings Institution, March 2018, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es\\_20180314\\_looneyincarceration\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es_20180314_looneyincarceration_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training." Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. 2014. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>

## Evaluation Findings

CEO is pleased to present this brief summarizing findings from a New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) evaluation.

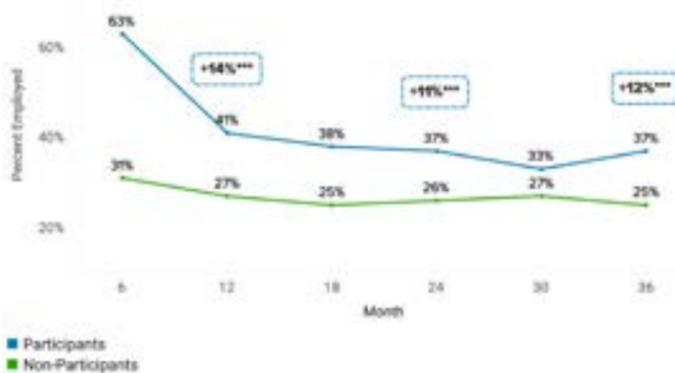
DCJS found improvements in employment at every observation point in the study, a first for CEO. Highlights included:

- **Impact in Expansion Sites:** Over the last 10 years, CEO has expanded its presence in New York State, opening offices in Buffalo and Albany in 2009 followed by Rochester in 2010. Impact on recidivism, employment, or both was detected in every site included in the study.
- **Medium Term Employment Impacts:** 12 months post-enrollment CEO participants were 52% more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the comparison group.
- **Long Term Employment Impacts:** Three years post-enrollment, CEO participants were 48% more likely to be employed than the comparison group.
- **Persistent Recidivism Impacts in NYC:** Consistent with previous recidivism impact findings, CEO-NYC participants were 19% less likely to be re-convicted or re-arrested for a felony 3 years post-enrollment.

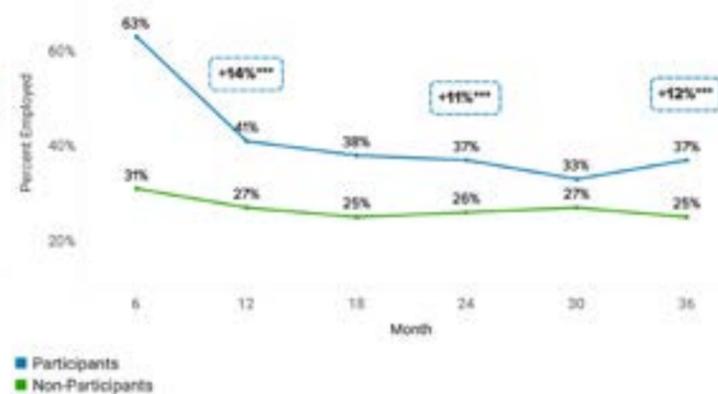


CEO's Theory of Change posits that immediate access to employment will positively impact recidivism and long-term connection to the workforce.

CEO NYC: Felony Re-Arrests



Percent Employed Over Time  
(EXCLUDING CEO ALBANY)



This evaluation was the first to show CEO's long-term positive impacts on employment; findings were statistically significant and included NYC, Rochester, and Buffalo. While impossible to verify with this data, we theorize that these gains may be driven by CEO's sizable investment in job retention services following a previous randomized control trial (RCT) conducted by MDRC.

## Employment Findings in Detail

Evaluators reported statistically significant improvements in employment rates for treatment group members from NYC, Buffalo, and Rochester. At 36 months post-enrollment, 37% of CEO participants were employed for at least one day in the quarter compared to 25% of the comparison group; this represents a 48% increase in labor force participation. Broken out by site, NYC and Buffalo were strongest with 63% and 52% increases, respectively; findings were significant at the .01 level. Rochester showed statistically significant improvements at 6 months post-enrollment only. Albany was excluded from the findings because evaluators were unable to construct a comparison group. To test whether participants' employment is actually reflecting their job with CEO, DCJS did one round of analysis having removed employment data tied to CEO's tax ID. Removing that data had negligible effects on the findings and program impacts remained statistically significant in NYC and Buffalo.



Three years following enrollment, CEO participants were 8.2 percentage points less likely to experience a reconviction or felony rearrest; relative to the comparison group, this was a 19% reduction in both measures.

## Recidivism Findings in Detail

**Consistent with past evaluations, DCJS reported statistically significant reductions in reconvictions and felony re-arrests for CEO's New York City office.** Three years following enrollment, CEO participants were 8.2 percentage points less likely to experience a reconviction or felony rearrest; relative to the comparison group, this was a 19% reduction in both measures. Rochester showed a statistically significant 35% reduction in arrests and cut the felony re-arrest rate in half at 12 months post-enrollment, but no impact was detected after that point. In Buffalo, no impacts were detected on recidivism.

Both Rochester and Buffalo had smaller numbers of participants observed in the study; this gives the study less power in those locations and makes it more challenging to detect impacts.

## Evaluation Methodology

In 2010, DCJS launched an evaluation of reentry providers, testing their effectiveness with reducing recidivism and improving employment. The basics of the evaluation were as follows:

- **Quasi-experimental design using propensity score matching:** Evaluators took each individual who worked at least one day on a CEO work crew and identified another person similar to them on 45 variables like demographics, socioeconomic status, and

criminal background. CEO participants made up the treatment group and the individuals who “look like them” made up the comparison group.

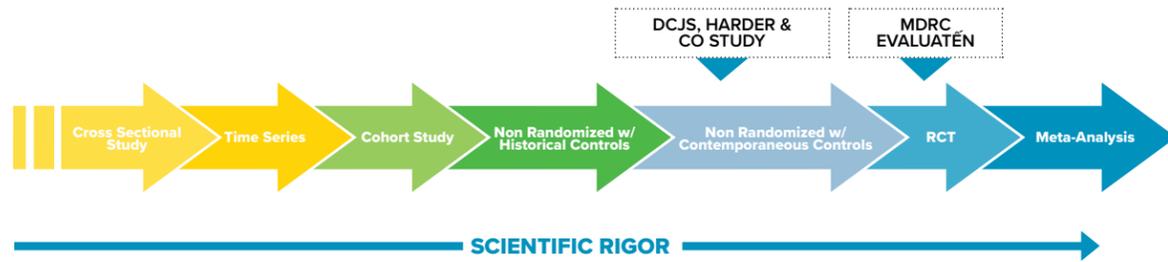
- **Treatment group members got meaningful “dosage” of CEO, increasing likely selection bias:** Individuals included in the treatment group enrolled at CEO and worked at least one day on a transitional work crew, approximating a meaningful “dosage” of CEO services. At all sites there is some attrition between enrollment and working on a crew; in FY14, close to the time of this study, 77% of the participants who enrolled at CEO worked at least one day on a transitional jobs crew.
- **Included all New York State sites:** The treatment group included 605 CEO participants from Buffalo, New York City, and Rochester. In Albany evaluators were unable to construct a comparison group. Data was still provided about Albany participants.
- **Followed people for 3 years post-enrollment:** Treatment and comparison group members were enrolled at CEO between 2010 and 2012 and were observed for 36 months.
- **Employment Metrics:** The study reports on the percent of treatment and comparison group members that were employed at 6-month intervals following enrollment. “Employed” is defined as having been employed for at least one day in the quarter of observation. For example, if someone was enrolled in October 2010 then their 6 month follow-up would be in April 2011. They would be considered employed if they had any earnings in the quarter (April 1-June 30, 2011). Analysis was done using Unemployment Insurance data provided by the New York State Department of Labor; treatment group members had higher rates of returned labor data than the comparison group.
- **Recidivism Metrics:** The study reports on re-arrests, felony re-arrests, and re-arrests that result in convictions at 12 month intervals following enrollment. For the final measure, the evaluators included re-convictions that occurred outside of the 3-year follow-up period; the associated arrest had to fit within the 3-year observation period.

## Contextualizing the Results

A recent guest lecturer at CEO told us that “you have to wake up every morning assuming that what you’re doing doesn’t work.” While we might not live at that extreme, our participants’ path from incarceration to employment is complex and we have to be careful consumers of research and internal performance data.

**First, this study is not an RCT.** There are some who will say that these findings are unreliable because they didn’t come from an RCT and could be due, in whole or in part, to unobserved differences between the treatment and comparison groups.

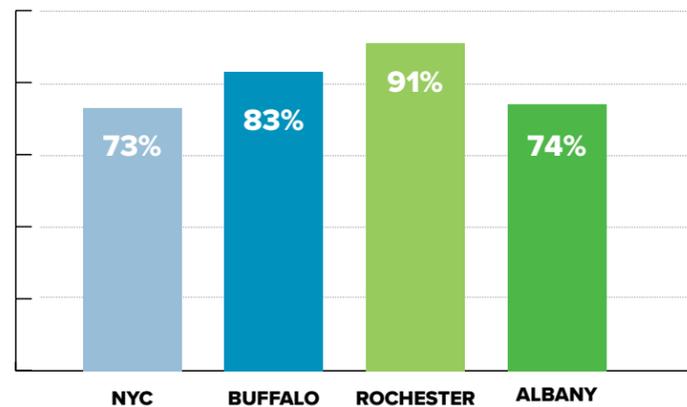
The chevron below presents study designs in increasing order of rigor; the DCJS design is towards the highest degree but still considered less rigorous than a well-designed RCT.<sup>3</sup>



**Characteristics of people in the treatment group, including motivation, may account for some of the positive impact findings.** In this study, people were included in the treatment group once they worked at least one day of a transitional job. This introduces a risk of some selection bias, or some level of motivation among treatment group members that could look different from members of the comparison group. At CEO we typically see some drop off between enrollment and working one day of transitional work (see table).

In addition, when matching with administrative data, treatment group members had higher rates of returned DOL labor data than the comparison group. It is unknown whether missing

**Percent of Enrolled Participants Who Work on a CEO Crew (FY15)**



employment data for comparison group members was due to lack of work history or an invalid SSN, and what exactly that missing data means. This missing data could increase the likelihood. There could be other characteristics, like detailed employment history, that differ between the two groups and were not accounted for in the study design. It is impossible for us to know with certainty if these differences exist and, if so, whether that bias accounts for some or all of the impacts found.

Even so, we're encouraged by these findings. It's hard to demonstrate long term impact on employment and we were certainly thrilled to receive these evaluation findings from DCJS. There are only a few other organizations that we know of, Recycle Force, Employ Minnesota, and Project Rio, that have demonstrated impact on both employment and recidivism with any level of rigor.

<sup>3</sup> Modified based on "2013 State of the Field in Youth Economic Opportunities." Making Cents International. <https://youtheconomicopportunities.org/book/1456/522-locate-proposed-evaluation-within-spectrum-scientific-rigor>

## CEO's Impact: An Evolving Story

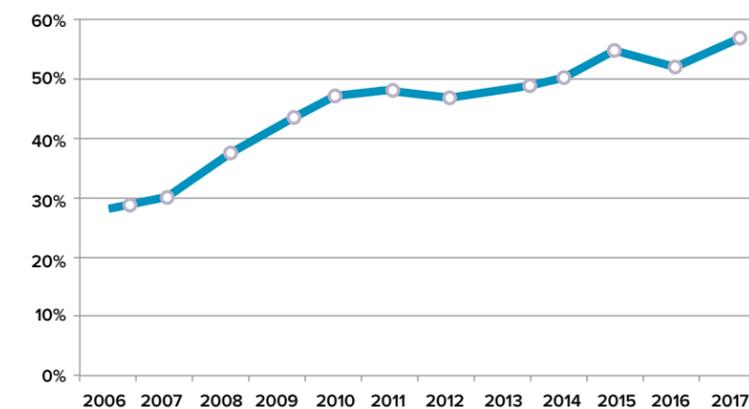
These findings fit within a longer story of evaluation and improvement. CEO completed its first RCT in the mid-2000s in partnership with evaluator MDRC.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent evaluations followed, including a matched comparison study by Harder & Co analyzing impacts of CEO San Diego. These studies, along with other non-experimental data, found that CEO produced a statistically significant and compelling impact on recidivism. MDRC found that impact was strongest among three subgroups: those who came to CEO within 3 months of their release from prison, those with extensive criminal records, and those at highest risk of re-arrest and re-conviction.

In these studies, CEO did not demonstrate an impact on employment; MDRC did not find improvements and Harder & Co did not include employment data. For an organization like CEO where "employment" is at the center of our mission, we've remained motivated to move the needle in this area.

CEO internalized the MDRC findings in a few ways. We began to:

- **Prioritize Recently Released Individuals:** Confident that our impact was strongest for those who enrolled within 3 months of release, CEO partnered with criminal justice partners to ensure an efficient referral and enrollment pathway.
- **Focus on High Risk Individuals:** Confident that we could make the greatest difference for those at high risk of recidivating, we worked with partners to identify and connect us to those identified as highest risk on the reentry COMPAS, the instrument New York State uses to determine reentry supervision level.

**Percent of Participants Achieving One Year of Job Retention**



<sup>4</sup> Redcross, Cindy, Megan Millenky, Timothy Rudd, and Valerie Levshin. (2012). More than a Job: Final Results from the Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Transitional Jobs Program. OPRE Report 2011-18. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/more-job>

- **Help Participants Stay Employed:** CEO invested in its Retention unit whose staff work with participants for one year after job placement. Staff provide 1:1 coaching and up to \$500 in annual retention incentives. This unit has been critical for helping participants recover after job loss; many participants require more than one job placement before they find a good match and get into positive work habits. Prior to the creation of the retention unit CEO would not have been actively engaged with participants after job loss, leaving them with limited resources to find new employment. We believe that this and other important services by the retention unit have made a meaningful difference for participants.
- **Retention-Focused Performance Management:** CEO upgraded its data management system, shifting over to a Salesforce platform and changing culture around use of data. CEO's performance management muscle grew stronger and, when MDRC results were released, we became even more intentional about tracking and managing towards job retention outcomes. We achieved modest but sustainable improvements year over year, with 180-day and 365-day outcomes improving a few percentage points each year (see chart).<sup>5</sup> This evaluation gave us the chance to test whether those improvements would persist when compared to a comparison group.

These changes made us optimistic that we were improving our impact on long term employment among CEO participants. This DCJS evaluation was one of our first opportunities to test it.

## Strategic Questions for Further Learning

### How confident should we be in these findings given the study's design and execution?

Many stakeholders are skeptical of evaluations that are not RCTs. CEO's more rigorous but older evaluations do not show employment impact, while this less rigorous, more current evaluation does show improvements. These improvements mirror findings that we've seen in our internal data year-to-year (see chart) which improve our confidence in their directionality.

### How does this study contribute to our understanding of the relationship between work and recidivism?

Both recidivism and employment are important outcomes and we typically think of them as being intertwined: having a job, and the behaviors that come with it, are factors that help people desist from further crime.<sup>6</sup> This study, like CEO's prior RCT, suggests that the relationship between work and crime is not so straightforward. In New York City, DCJS showed increasing employment and a decrease in recidivism. In Buffalo, however, participants saw dramatic increases in employment but no impact on recidivism. Rochester saw the reverse. CEO's earlier RCT showed that it's possible to lessen recidivism without seeing changes in long term employment; in this evaluation we saw in Buffalo that the reverse can be true. Much remains to be learned about the relationship between criminal justice practice and employment.

<sup>5</sup> Retention rates are calculated as the percent of CEO participants employed in any full-time job 180 and 365 days after their first job placement.

<sup>6</sup> The Council on State Governments Justice Center. Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies: Reducing Recidivism and Increasing Job Readiness. September 2013. [http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Final.Reentry-and-Employment.pp\\_.pdf](http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Final.Reentry-and-Employment.pp_.pdf)

**How do local criminal justice practices, especially policing and parole, interact with workforce system effectiveness?** How a corrections system treats people on parole can have impacts on employment - for example, a Parole Department's level of flexibility for things like curfew can open or close doors to job options for CEO participants. These practices vary by county, and even by office. While there are too many variables at play to hypothesize about how parole practice played into these research findings, we're finding hope in strong, current research on community corrections including [this recent report](#) from the Columbia Justice Lab.

**What's the right next step for research and internal improvement efforts?** While these findings make us optimistic, we recognize that there is almost certainly some bias in the findings due to the study design. If given the opportunity we would like to analyze how similar this treatment group was to the general parole population we served at the time of the study. Moving forward, we could seek out a more rigorous impact evaluation to see if these impacts emerge again. We could also seek out similar quasi-experimental evaluation opportunities at sites outside of New York to learn more and check for consistency of impact. Over the past 6 months CEO has developed a Strategic Evidence Plan to support an ambitious approach to experimentation, learning and evaluation at CEO. These findings from DCJS will be incorporated into the Strategic Evidence Plan and influence future steps as CEO seeks to inform ourselves and the field about what works for people coming home from prison and jail.

## Appendix A: Descriptions and Links to Past CEO Evaluations

MDRC conducted a Randomized Control Trial of CEO's New York City location that monitored participants who enrolled between January 2004 and October 2005. MDRC followed those participants for 3 years post-random assignment, using administrative data to monitor treatment and control group differences on a variety of employment and recidivism measures. MDRC was able to observe employment rates as well as earnings in their employment findings. Their recidivism findings included arrests, convictions, and bed days in both prisons and jails.

Read more: [https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full\\_451.pdf](https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_451.pdf)

Harder & Co conducted a matched comparison analysis of CEO's San Diego location that monitored participants who were assigned to probation between October 2011 and March 2014. Study participants did not have a standard follow-up period; rather, the evaluators observed all data up to a specific calendar end date. Harder & Co reported on recidivism findings but only had access to county data so all findings were limited to jail bed days.

Read more: [http://ceoworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CEO-SD-Retrospective-Outcomes-Analysis\\_FINAL.pdf](http://ceoworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CEO-SD-Retrospective-Outcomes-Analysis_FINAL.pdf)

MDRC conducted a fidelity study of CEO's sites opened outside of NYC and published a report in 2016 finding that the sites were operating with fidelity to NYC's core operations.

Read more: <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/successful-prisoner-reentry-program-expands>



*The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) is dedicated to providing immediate, effective, and comprehensive employment services to individuals who have recently returned home from incarceration. Our highly structured and tightly supervised programs help participants regain the skills and confidence needed for successful transitions to stable, productive lives.*



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