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Employment Dimensions of Reentry:

Understanding the Nexus between Prisoner Reentry and Work

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Reentry and Prison Work Programs

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this discussion piece is to highlight issues surrounding work programs in prison for recidivism. While these issues are inevitably somewhat complex, the programs themselves are fairly straightforward. The programs fit into three main categories: jobs in the prison setting, short term vocational training in prison, and short term assistance in the job search process upon release. There are also some examples of programs which cut across categories, most often providing training inside prison along with job search assistance outside of prison. The short answer to the question of whether any of these will reduce recidivism is “MAYBE.” This paper will not endeavor to review all the programs because Wilson et al. (2001) recently completed an excellent comprehensive meta-analysis of 53 experimental or quasi-experimental treatment-control comparisons based on 33 evaluations of prison education, vocation and work programs. This list includes 19 studies conducted during the 1990’s and includes all of the evaluations included in a broader review of labor market programs (Bushway and Reuter 2002).

Based on their meta-analysis, Wilson and colleagues find that participants in the work programs are less likely to recidivate than those who do not participate in a treatment program. The average effect is substantial. If we assume that the non-participants have a recidivism rate of 50%, the program participants have a recidivism rate of 39%, a reduction of more than 20%. The effects of work programs and training programs are roughly equivalent. In support of the claim that work contributes to recidivism, program participants were substantially more likely to be employed than non-participants in studies with that information, and the studies with the largest employment effect tended to also have the largest reduction in recidivism.

Wilson and colleagues however, include a strong caveat to these findings—these results are based on studies that are extremely methodologically weak. Only three studies used an experimental design and only one of the non-experimental studies, Saylor and Gaes (1996) used what Wilson et al. (2001) considered to be strong statistical controls for selection bias between the participants and non-participants. Perhaps the 20% difference between participants and non-participants is driven by pre-existing differences between the two groups that are independent of the work program. None of the experiments find a significant effect, although Saylor and Gaes do find a significant effect of a reasonable magnitude.

If we were to limit this paper to what is known from these evaluations, we would have to stop here and conclude rather unhelpfully that more research is needed. Yet, we know a lot more about work and the ability of work programs to change behavior than what we know from prisons—there is a very large literature on work programs for unemployed people in the community, including youth and welfare recipients. There is also a growing criminological literature on what factors might be associated with desistance from crime. In that spirit, it is possible to at least offer some speculative propositions about the nature of work in prison.

PROPOSITION 1: WORK PROGRAMS ARE UBIQUITOUS IN PRISONS

Unlike other programs such as counseling, prison work programs can be justified for reasons other than rehabilitation of the individual offender. From the perspective of the policy maker in the criminal justice system, they can help manage the population by occupying the time of the prisoners, aid in the operation of the prison, create revenue (maybe), and provide a way for prisoners to “pay back” their debt to society. As a result, virtually every prison has some type of work program for at least some of the inmates in the prison.

While these goals need not be antithetical to the goal of rehabilitation, they are also not necessarily complementary. It is not clear, for example, how preparing lunch for other inmates inherently prepares an inmate for work outside of prison. The multi-faceted nature of work programs is therefore a two-edged sword. On the one hand, jobs in prison, either on-site jobs, or work programs in the community, have been and remain very common. On the other hand, programs that try to directly address reentry and rehabilitation (usually by offering more structure or by creating connections between prison and community programs) often face substantial interference from prison management. Perhaps the clearest fact from 30 years of evaluations of work training programs focused on reduced recidivism is that theoretically sound work-based programs are difficult to implement in the prison setting. The underlying reason appears to be that it is very difficult to operate in an environment where the goal of the system (management of the population) trumps the goal of the program (successful reentry).

Perhaps the best example of this problem can be found in the review of the Vocational Delivery System (Lattimore, Witte and Baker 1990). This is one of the best conceived programs

in the literature because it tried to organize the incarceration experience from intake to release, including a community component, around the goal of obtaining work upon release. The Protocol “suggested that the VDS include (1) working individual with inmates to identify vocational interests and aptitudes, (2) developing individual plans of study for improving vocational skills, (3) providing the identified training as well as other needed services, and (4) helping inmates secure post-release employment” (Lattimore et al. 1990:118). Despite the best efforts of a committed staff, only 16% of the experimental group at least started all of the components of the program for which data was available. According to the authors, “(t)his simple list represent a complex program requiring employees within two prison to coordinate among themselves and with employees of other agencies” (Lattimore et al. 1990:118). This coordination apparently proved very difficult, especially in a prison setting where inmates were released and transferred without warning, program slots were not always available at the right time along with myriad other problems. Even with implementation problems, the experimental group still had a 20% reduction in recidivism after two years versus the control group (from 46% to 36%) in an experimental setting. This result is meaningful because it is almost the same magnitude as what typical evaluations find WITHOUT the controls for selection found in this experiment. One can only imagine what the program might have been able to do if it had been fully implemented.

Results such as the above are perhaps one reason why researchers are increasingly beginning to assert that the success of work programs (and other programs) to reduce recidivism depends on whether prison management ultimately buys into the goal of successful reentry (which would include avoiding recidivism by definition). For example, Petersilia’s (2003) top recommendation is that policy makers make reentry (and recidivism) one of the explicit goals of prison management. Whether this can occur given the socio-political situation¹ is beyond the scope of this paper but it clearly needs to be considered in any discussion about “successful” programs. The best designed program will not work if it is not implemented effectively.

¹ There is a long social-political history about work programs in prison with respect to both potential corruption/exploitation and conflict with organized labor which has nothing to do with rehabilitation but must ultimately be considered in any program recommendation to increase or change the practice of work and work training in prison. Also, many of the components of worker training programs that might enhance rehabilitation run the risk of appearing to “coddle” prisoners or providing resources to offenders that are not available to more deserving citizens who have not violated the law.

The problem of implementation in a prison setting is all the more important because the question of work programs in the United States is emphatically not a question of work OR prison, but rather work AND prison. While there was some experimentation with pre-trial diversion programs in the 1970's in New York City (Court Employment Project), the program was discontinued at least in part because it failed to reduce recidivism and because it resulted in net-widening by the prosecutor's office. All other programs in the general review literature involve either work/training in prison or after release from prison.

PROPOSITION 2: PRISONERS ARE DETACHED FROM LEGITIMATE WORLD OF WORK PRIOR TO ENTRY INTO PRISON

Most incarcerated individuals have extremely low levels of educational achievement and very limited job skills. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, only 59% of state prison inmates had a high school diploma or its equivalent (compared to 85% for the adult population as a whole), and only two-thirds of inmates were employed during the month before they were arrested for their current offense. Much of this work is part time, and does not reflect stable full time work. In a recent presentation on work in progress, Kling and Tyler show that incarcerated offenders in Florida averaged about \$1,200–2,000 a year in formal labor market earnings prior to incarceration. Perhaps these shocking numbers are caused by the fact that many offenders come from very isolated inner city communities which are themselves detached from the world of legal work (Wilson 1997). Or perhaps lack of work is why these individuals are in prison in the first place. There is fairly strong empirical evidence that an individual's criminal behavior is responsive to changes in his or her employment status.² That lack of work is FTB correlated with crime leads to the hope for prison-based work programs to reduce recidivism.

² Sampson and Laub (1993) used data from the Gluecks' 1939 Boston cohort to show that job instability from age 17 to age 25 was correlated with higher arrest rates from age 25 to age 32, even after controls for stable individual differences were included in the model. Thornberry and Christenson (1984) found unemployment positively correlated with more arrests, especially for minority youths in Wolfgang's 1945 Philadelphia cohort. Farrington et al. (1986) used data from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development to show that the probability of conviction for property crime increased when an individual was unemployed, provided that the individual was predisposed to criminal behavior. Needels (1996) used data from a ten-year follow-up of ex-offenders in Georgia to show that crime and wages were negatively related. Finally, Uggen and Thompson (1999) showed that legal earnings have a negative effect on illegal earnings using data from a contemporary sample of Minnesota youth.

The argument is that if we could improve the poor work outcomes of offenders, then we could reduce crime. Thus, findings that ex-offenders face discrimination in the labor market are particularly troublesome to some observers. Not only is the lack of work ‘the reason’ for crime (and prison), prison appears to exacerbate the problem by “labeling” an individual as an ex-convict.

An alternative, less benevolent interpretation of the poor work outcomes of ex-offenders is simply that prisoners are individuals who chose to specialize in crime rather than work and are therefore “embedded” in crime (Hagan 1993). A comprehensive review of vocational programs in prison in 1973 (Rovner-Pieczenik 1973) makes this point clearly. Despite strong commitment and great enthusiasm by program operators, the study reluctantly reported that very few programs led to a substantial decline in recidivism. By way of explanation, the report highlighted problems in persuading correctional institutions to focus on education and post-release objectives. The report also highlighted the great educational deficits of the offenders, generally high school dropouts reading several years below grade level with no discernible job skills. The author concluded “that we entertain no fantasies about the degree of change which manpower projects for the offender can help to bring about. Some offenders will remain unemployed and unemployable no matter what programs are available” (Rovner-Pieczenik 1973:77). Similar thoughts are echoed in many of the process evaluations found of this type of program. Employment programs aimed at offenders must fundamentally recognize that these individuals have, on average, very low skills and limited job experience.

PROPOSITION 3: IMPROVING WORK OUTCOMES IS EXPENSIVE

The observation that many at-risk individuals lack basic job skills was the original source of interest in the early 1960s in assessing whether crime might be reduced by providing at-risk individuals with additional educational and job skills. Numerous programs have been developed to provide basic education, vocational training and work experience for people in high crime/high unemployment communities. These programs in many ways mimic what is available to offenders in prison. The Training and Employment Services division of the Employment and Training Administration of the Department of Labor spends large sums (\$5.5 billion in FY 2000)

on skills-developing programs aimed at increasing the employment prospects of individuals who are at high risk of being persistently unemployed. Most of these interventions target youths, particularly adolescent males, on the reasonable assumption that early interventions have higher pay-off if successful. Evaluations in this area are usually much more rigorous than evaluations of programs in prisons.

In his review of these programs, Heckman (1994) starts with an important observation about what we might reasonably expect out of employment programs. Suppose we think of vocational training as an investment. From an investment perspective, a 10% return over the long run would be considered good for a training program. Most training programs in the general population cost between \$1,000–\$5,000 per recipient, which means that a \$100–\$500 gain in annual earnings would be considered good. And in fact, this is roughly what evaluations find for the general population. Heckman (1994:112) concludes the following:

Employment and training programs increase the earnings of female AFDC recipients. Earnings gains are (a) modest, (b) persistent over several years, (c) arise from several different treatments, (d) are sometimes quite cost-effective....For adult males the evidence is consistent with that for adult women.

Now consider incarcerated offenders. They have even lower earnings than the “average” participant in employment and training programs, they have potential to earn far more from other sources such as drugs, and they carry the stigma of prison which might further depress their earnings potential. Thus, we should expect that the return might be lower and more investment will be required just to become employable for ex-offenders. In this context, it is reasonable to ask what we have the right to expect from average transition program such as Project Rio in Texas. This program costs about \$300 per offender and consists largely of job referrals and some help with preparing for job interviews. This may be enough to keep some people from returning to crime at the margin, and but our expectations should be low at the outset given what we know about from the larger world of training and employment programs.

PROPOSITION 4: MOTIVATION MATTERS

Conspicuous by their absence in Heckman's list of successful participants in work programs are young males. Despite a great deal of time and effort, work programs aimed at young men have not proven routinely successful. This is particularly worrisome given that young men are obviously the group most likely to participate in crime.

Programs aimed at youth mostly fall into one of three categories, arrayed below in order of increasing expense and program intensity: 1) The provision of summer work or other forms of subsidized employment in either public or private sector organizations, 2) Short-term training with job placement for out-of-school youth, and 3) Long-term, intensive residential programs providing vocational and life skills training, general education and job placement after graduation (Job Corps). Given that some of these programs are very similar to the programs offered to women and older adult men, it is reasonable to ask why the same program that works for adult women and men does not appear to work for young men.

In fact, one of the subsidized work programs aimed at ex-offenders along with other at-risk individuals (Supported Work) found no effect on outcomes when it was originally reported. But a reanalysis by Uggen (2000) demonstrated that the program actually had a positive impact on earnings and recidivism for ex-offenders older than 26 years of age. A similar finding was reported with the Baltimore Life experiments which provided assistance to inmates as they left prison. Clearly older offenders are taking the same inputs as young offenders in terms of wages and reaching a different conclusion with respect to the relative cost and benefits of crime.

Prominent desistance researchers (Shover 1996, Maruna 2001) suggest that this "age effect" means that there has been a change in the fundamental orientation of the individual which ultimately leads to desistance from crime. Although this process is not well understood, there have been some attempts to describe this process by which people move from active offending to desistance (e.g. Fagan 1989, Baskin and Sommers 1998, Maruna 2001, Laub and Sampson 2001). There is unusual consensus that the necessary first step in the process of desistance is the decision to stop. After the decision has been made, the individual will need to learn new skills and develop the ability to succeed in new roles, roles which include "employee."

If this process of desistance is an accurate representation of the process experienced by most offenders, then job training or other work related assistance will only help offenders who

have taken the first step and are motivated to stop offending. The positive results of work programs for older offenders may exist because older offenders tend to be more motivated to exit offending. Perhaps the strong positive results for offenders who voluntarily participate in prison training programs exist because these individuals have self-identified themselves as individuals who are ready to desist.

I take two lessons from the fact that the motivation to desist appears to be a pre-requisite for success in a work assistance program. First, it makes no sense to expect everyone to benefit equally from work programs. Individuals who are addicted to alcohol or drugs, or individuals who have not fundamentally decided to exit offending will not benefit from access to a job or increased skills. Although some might be tempted to read this as an invitation to “cream” the “best” prisoners into work programs, this recommendation is consistent with Andrews et al. (1990) suggestion that all prison programs be addressed to the needs of the offender. Work training is only helpful for people who are ready and willing to exit from a life of crime. It is worth noting that the strong positive results from Lattimore et al. (1990) evaluation of Vocational Delivery System was based on a sample of young male offenders age 18–22 who were screened for acceptance into the program.

Second, if we want to serve young males or others heavily embedded in the crime, we have to focus on motivating individuals to change rather than simply providing skills or a job. One reason it may be harder to successfully serve young males than older males is that the younger males are more embedded in a life of crime. For these individuals, marginal increases in the opportunity costs of crime may not be enough to entice an individual to leave crime. The benefits to crime will always outweigh the costs of crime without a massive change in the way they look at the world. In other words, simply changing the incentive structure within reasonable ranges will not be enough to effect change. True change will only occur if people embedded in crime change the way they evaluate the consequences of their actions—a process which can only start when the individual is willing to actively participate in the process.

Job Corps, an intensive program for at-risk youth, serves as a useful model for this type of program centered on work. Job Corps is a long-term, primarily residential training program with emphasis on academic and vocational credentials and it is the only program to show consistent results for young adults. The residential component is seen as key to the program because it provides people from very disordered environments with the experience of living in a

structured community committed to the concept of legitimate work. This environment is thought to “activate” the vocational and educational components. The high cost (~15K) is a consequence of the residential element of the program and its severely disadvantaged population (over 80% are high school dropouts).

There have been two major evaluations of Job Corps, one in 1982 (Mallar et al. 1982) and one in 2000 (Schochet et al. 2000). The earlier non-experimental evaluation found that four years after graduating from Job Corps, enrollees earned on average \$1,300 more per year than the control group, a difference of 15%. These achievements corresponded with real increases in educational achievement. Enrollees were 5 times as likely to get a GED or finish high school, and twice as likely to go to college. Also, there was a significant decline in arrests for serious crimes, especially theft. However, there was also an unexplained increase in minor arrests, especially traffic incidents.

The 2000 evaluation (Schochet et al. 2000) was a large experiment involving random assignment based on all 80,883 applicants who applied to Job Corps between November 1994 and February 1996.³ As in many of the more structured programs, many people did not complete the program—over 50% of the study group either did not start the program or lasted less than three months. Many people clearly react negatively to Job Corps’ attempt to challenge their world view. The average participant enrolled for 8 months and received roughly one additional school year of education, including vocational training. The participants were 70% more likely to receive a GED or high school degree, and more than twice as likely to have vocational certification than non-participants. In contrast to the earlier evaluation, Job Corps participants were found to be no more likely to attend college.

Employment is more difficult to evaluate, since participants were less likely than non-participants to work during their participation in Job Corps. As a result, it takes the Job Corps workers some time to “catch up” to peers who could have been working the entire time period. It appears that this finally occurs in the last 4 months of the study. Job Corps participants were only 3% more likely to be working than non participants but the weekly wages of Job Corps

³ 5,997 were assigned to a control group and not allowed to sign up for Job Corps for three years. They were allowed to participate in other training programs, and during the follow-up period 64% participated in some type of education program, receiving on average ½ year of education, including vocational training. The fact that they can

participants were 8% higher than the control group. This is comparable to the academic estimates of 5-8% increase in wages for every additional year of schooling. It remains to be seen if these gains are stable over a longer period of time

In the 30 month follow-up period 23.3% of the treatment group were arrested compared to 27.7% of the control group, a difference of 15.9%. The treatment group was also 17% less likely to be convicted. As in the 1982 study, the biggest difference occurs during the first year follow-up, when the treatment group is enrolled in Job Corps. Because Job Corps is a highly structured program that is usually residential, this finding is not surprising. It is tempting to dismiss this finding as the result of “incapacitation” and not real behavioral change.⁴ However, if, as suggested above, involvement in the criminal justice system leads to future problems through labeling, this small difference could be meaningful for later outcomes. Furthermore, unlike in the 1982 study, it is also true that there is a 17% difference in arrests during the last 6 months of the 30 month follow-up when virtually all applicants have graduated from Job Corps. This result is at least suggestive of a true impact of this program on criminality. The 2000 study also replicates the finding from the 1982 study that Job Corps participants who do commit crimes tend to be involved in less serious events than the non-participants who commit crimes.

The link between employment gains and crime drops is an encouraging sign that real progress is being measured. However, there was little meaningful difference between participants and non-participants in lifestyle issues like drug use, family formation, and place of residence. This finding raises some doubt about the lasting impact of this program since lower drug use, movement out of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and better family relationships are thought to be highly correlated with long term declines in criminality. In addition, this program continues to have high dropouts as youth decide they would rather not undertake the hard work required to become involved in the labor market.

I take two messages from Job Corps. First, it is possible to effect deep seated change in how an individual views the world in addition to improving work outcomes. Second, this process is very expensive and poorly understood.

and do make use of other educational opportunities might lead to underestimates of the benefits of job training more generally.

⁴ In fact, the males who are in the non-residential programs are no less likely to be arrested than the control group.

PROPOSITION 5: STAYING STRAIGHT—THE TRANSITION MATTERS

Although the first step in desistance is the decision to go straight, this is in some ways the easiest part. It is easy to decide that crime is bad. The hard part is to change one's orientation and make it stick. In his influential book on desistance, Maruna (2001) argues that the process of desistance is fundamentally about staying straight—the day in and day out process of avoiding old habits and patterns and choosing to act in new way. Baskin and Sommers (1998) suggest that the process of constructing new patterns is often the most difficult part—old networks need to be abandoned and entirely new networks of friends and social supports need to be constructed. Prison work programs can help with part of this process by providing the prisoner with new skills that can be used to create the world, but much of this work needs to be done after release. The current process of simply releasing an offender with no support except some job search help (maybe) means that there is almost no support for the creation of this new prosocial network. In all likelihood, the only network an offender will have on the outside is the network the person had when he entered prison—a network that probably supported, not discouraged, the person's involvement with crime. The average offender who is motivated to change but lacks some of the basic skills needed to construct a new social reality should be expected to struggle in this context. It seems plausible that a rough transition, including but not limited to difficulty finding work, could stop real change before it even starts. But we also do not know what kind of help is most needed. Perhaps intense support like that of 12 Step Program is needed. Or, perhaps a caseworker approach like that used in many Welfare to Work programs is most needed. The caseworker appears to serve as a “designated friend/cheerleader” as the former welfare recipient deals with the day to day struggles of life in the work force. This model may or may not transfer into the mostly male world of ex-offenders, but much of the task during the transition phase appears to be internal to the individual. The ex-offender needs to keep convincing himself that success can be achieved as a non-offender. If he is the only person who believes that, then it is hard to understand how he can be successful.

PROPOSITION 6: STAYING STRAIGHT: NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS

Based on recent survey evidence, recent ex-offenders are the least desirable employee applicant in the labor market pool (Holzer et al. 2003). Not only are a large number of jobs proscribed, employers in the remaining jobs will usually not be eager to hire ex-offenders. Even in strong job markets, ex-offenders will usually end up in the least desirable, lowest paying jobs unless they are exceptionally well qualified or well connected. As a response to this fact, policymakers sometimes suggest that the federal government step in by banning discrimination or providing bonding or some other intervention to increase wages and job stability.

This response may place too much attention on employers rather than on the role of ex-offenders as employees. Surveys show that many employers are not fundamentally worried about a repeat crime on their premises or a negligent hiring lawsuit. Rather, they are worried that ex-offenders will not be good employees. And, based on employment records of ex-offenders, they have a right to be worried. Most ex-offenders have simply never demonstrated that they can commit to hold a job day in and day out for a substantial period of time. As a result, the single most important thing that any ex-offender can do for long term success is to get and keep one job for a significant period of time (possibly one year). Once the offender learns he can do it, he will actually start to learn new coping skills that help him maintain his new identity as a desistor. And once the ex-offender has demonstrated the ability to stick with something over the long haul, other employers will be more willing to hire him. In other words, better job opportunities await the ex-offender if and only if he can demonstrate—to himself and to others—the ability to work successfully for a period approaching one year. (This statement is consistent with recidivism research which shows that the vast majority of all failures occur within the first year after release [Langan 2002]).

This means that the important thing to focus on for ex-offenders is not only that an ex-offender has a job, but that he stays with it for a substantial period of time. From this perspective, recent NIJ reviews of the transitional job assistance programs are not encouraging (e.g. Project Rio, CEO, SAFER Foundation). Most of these evaluations are process evaluations without outcome evaluations, but they do provide statistics on job attainment for program participants after 6 months. The program with the best outcomes, CEO in New York, places 70% of its participants in jobs, but only 38% were still in these jobs 6 months later. This means that only

about 26% of all participants are on a clear road to success after 6 months. This seems worrisome. Perhaps job placement needs to be augmented with strategies that can be shown to help ex-offenders stay in that first job for a meaningful period of time. The idea of outside help may be crucial, because in the short term, the benefits of crime might well appear larger than the benefits of legitimate work. The Urban Institute's reentry study might identify new strategies for this crucial period.

CONCLUSION

Work programs are common in prison, but they are not necessarily designed to reduce recidivism. At this point in our learning, we do not know which work programs will be successful at reducing recidivism. In this paper, I have constructed a view of work programs that deviates somewhat from a simple economic framework that suggests that increased legal returns will lead to reduced crime. It is unlikely that any skill learned in prison during relatively short job training programs will fundamentally alter the cost-benefit calculus that led to the period of incarceration in the first place for more than a small number of offenders.

Any program that hopes to cause large scale change must focus on changing an individual's preferences or fundamental orientation changes. This change in fundamental orientation is what criminologists discuss in their description of the process of desistance. All available evidence suggests that this change is not easy to instigate from the outside, although many people apparently reach this stage on their own as they age. On the positive side, interviews with prison inmates suggest that the majority at least hope at some level to avoid crime when they exit prison. The key is whether they can take the necessary steps to succeed in the real world without crime, especially if crime still appears more attractive to work in the short term. Job training and work programs in prison might provide a way to start to build and maintain a new identity in prison before facing the challenges of release.

In this context, managing the transition out of prison is clearly a crucial stage in the process of staying straight. At the point of release, crime may still be an attractive option given the struggle to "go legit." This struggle to stay straight will be ongoing over a long period of time, although it may get easier over time. Over time, outsiders such as employers will begin to

trust this transition, and employment opportunities will improve. But the fundamental change has to start in the individual, not the labor market.

At this point, we need to learn far more about effective ways to encourage offenders to “stay straight” in the context of work programs. Unfortunately, this process will by definition take place largely outside of prison. As a result, there may be inherent limitations on how much we can expect prison managers to do beyond cooperating in attempts to smooth the reentry process. The other alternative is to radically transform prisons into environments where individuals can begin the practice of “staying straight” through regular work and pro-social attitudes/actions. Recent experiments in Oregon and elsewhere may provide useful insights into whether this is either practical or effective.

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