

DIONNE BARNES-PROBY, PRISCILLIA HUNT, LISA JONSSON, SAMANTHA CHERNEY

Bridge to Opportunities

How One Probation Agency Developed a Program Designed to Connect Probationers to High-Wage Jobs

Probation is the most commonly used sanction in the criminal justice system, with three-quarters of all felons under the community supervision of a probation officer in lieu of a prison sentence (Kaeble et al., 2015). The Bureau of Justice Statistics defines *probation* as “a court-ordered period of correctional supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to incarceration” (Kaeble et al., 2015, p. 11). In some cases, probation is a period of community supervision that follows a sentence of incarceration. Importantly, as part of probation, the court includes conditions that probationers must meet at the risk of facing (re)incarceration; these conditions may be standard in nature¹—reporting to a probation officer, submitting for random drug screening, and obtaining full-time employment—or there may be special condi-

tions.² Securing full-time employment may put significant pressure on probationers to obtain and keep jobs in a challenging and unwelcoming environment.

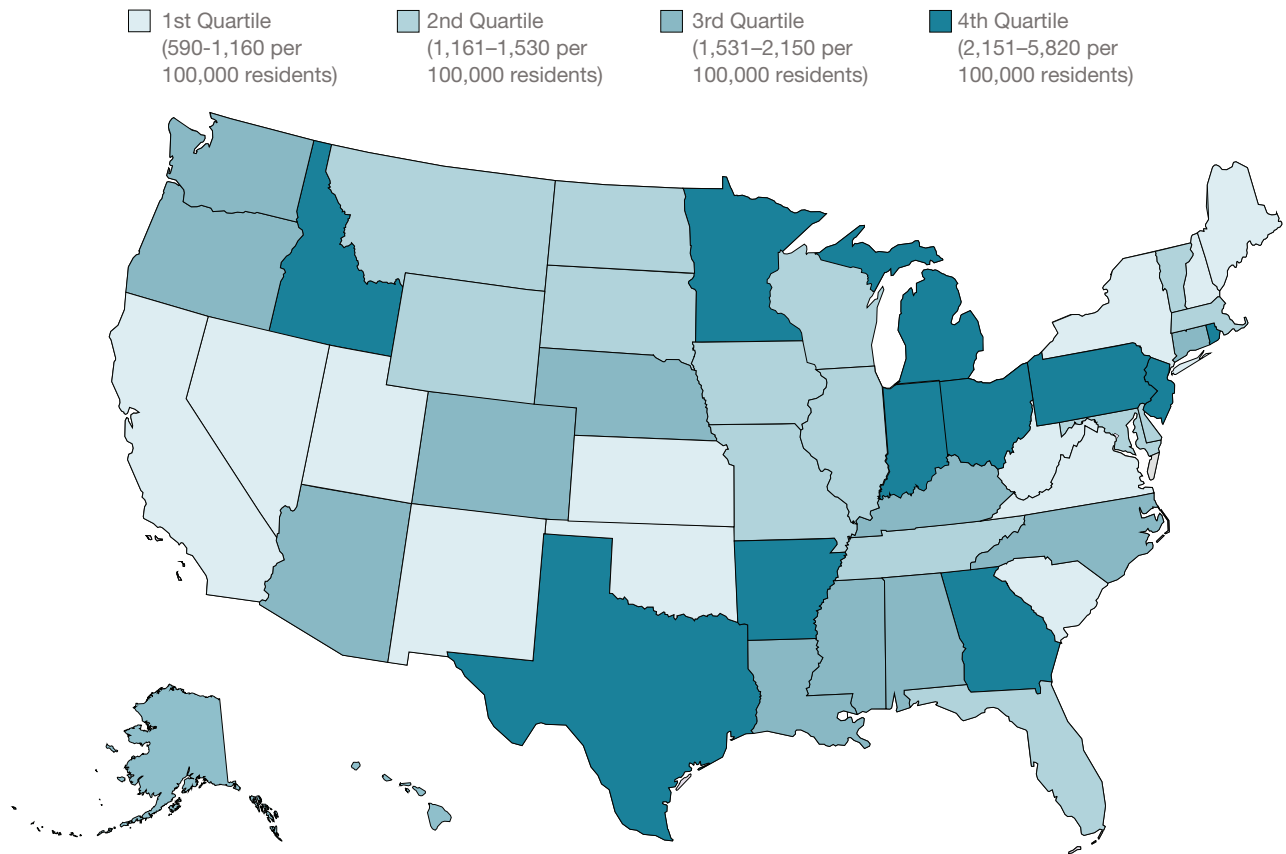
KEY FINDINGS

- The program develops and leverages relationships with service providers and local employers to ensure that probationers have access to a full range of support.
- The program has established and maintains a positive reputation with prospective employers to ensure ongoing job opportunities.
- Highly skilled instructors and dedicated staff allow for customized instruction and readily available support.
- Supplies and ancillary support are provided for probationers, who might not be able to afford the necessary materials.
- Program champions are used to help recruit, retain, and inspire students.
- Those in charge of recruitment and enrollment target probationers who are willing to invest in the program.
- It is crucial to select a “felon-friendly” career field that levels the playing field for probationers.

Background

Across the United States, there were close to 4 million adult probationers at the end of 2015, which accounts for 56 percent of the national criminal justice population (Kaeble et al., 2015). As shown in Figure 1, there is variation in the scale of the probation and parole population across states. On average, approximately 1,810 people per 100,000 residents ages 18 or older are on community supervision.

Figure 1. Map of U.S. Probation and Parole Population per Capita, by Quartile



SOURCE: Kaeble et al. (2015).

Abbreviations

ADRC	Adult Day Reporting Center
CTP	Career Training Partnership
GED	General Education Diploma
HiSET	High School Equivalency Test (formerly GED)
LS-CMI	Level of Service–Case Management Inventory
NCCT	Northern California Construction Training
Probation Department	Sacramento Probation Department
SCOE	Sacramento County Office of Education

This ranges from 590 per 100,000 in New Hampshire to 5,820 in Georgia.³

Who Is on Probation

Probationers tend to be young, male, and have low educational attainment (Fearn et al., 2016; Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll, 2003). Since 2005, most were on supervision for felony offenses, of which the most serious included property, drug-related, and violent crimes (Kaeble et al., 2015). Of probationers who leave supervision, about one-third fail to complete the terms of their supervision because of incarceration, abscondence, or other noncompliance (Kaeble et al., 2015). In addition, much of the probationer population faces considerable financial challenges, including low incomes. Further details of the probationer population are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Probationer Characteristics

Education	30–40 percent of probationers have less than a high school education (Harlow, 2003; Taylor, 2009).
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Income	18.3 percent of probationers have incomes of less than \$20,000 (Fearn et al., 2016).
	Compared with similar individuals in the general population, nearly twice as many probationers use government assistance programs (Fearn et al., 2016).
Health	Probationers are four to nine times more likely to have a substance use disorder than their general-population counterparts (Fearn et al., 2016).
Race	Since 2005, the racial makeup of probationers has held relatively steady at 55 percent non-Hispanic white, 30 percent non-Hispanic African-American, and 13 percent Hispanic or Latino (Kaeble et al., 2015).
	The rate of probation involvement for African-Americans (30 percent) is disproportionately high because this group reflects only 13 percent of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Labor Market Challenges for Probationers

Securing employment at a living wage is arguably one of the greatest challenges facing formerly incarcerated individuals. People with criminal records, including probationers, are less likely to be hired—unemployment among formerly incarcerated persons one year after release is around 50 percent (Visher, Debus, and Yahner, 2008), with annual earnings about 40 percent lower than those of comparable individuals without a record (Harley, 2014). Experimental research found that a criminal record reduced the likelihood of a call back from a prospective employer by up to 50 percent for people with otherwise identical levels of competence and employability characteristics (Pager, 2003).

Employment could enable these men and women to provide financial support to their families, which

could generate more-resilient support systems, improve self-esteem, and promote mental health (Duran et al., 2013). However, their inability to secure employment results in them being left out of income growth and reduces their quality of life, which might lead to recidivism.

Despite the positive relationship between employment and successful completion of probation or lower recidivism rates, probationers must contend with a number of barriers to employment. These can include both personal barriers (e.g., low levels of educational attainment, limited work experience, low skill levels), and employer concerns about productivity, reliability, and risk (Hillyer, 2016; Swanson, Langfitt-Reese, and Bond, 2012). Figure 3 illustrates some of these personal (or labor supply) characteristics and employer (or labor demand) barriers.

Figure 3. Barriers to Employment for People with Criminal Records

Personal barriers	Employer barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low productivity because of limited education and work experience (Freeman, 1992; Uggen, Wakefield, and Western, 2005) • Low social capital (Hagan, 1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about low productivity (Giguere and Dundes, 2002) • Concern about absenteeism and reliability (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll, 2004) • Negligent liability concerns (Giguere and Dundes, 2002)

How Did We Study a Probation Program Seeking to Achieve Higher Wages?

Case Selection: Career Training Partnership of Sacramento, California

In December 2013, recognizing the myriad challenges that probationers faced as they attempted to reenter the workforce, the Sacramento Probation Department (Probation Department) established an employment program known as the Career Training Partnership (CTP) program to provide construction trades-focused vocational and educational services (job readiness) to individuals on probation in Sacramento County and to assist probationers with securing employment (job placement) with labor unions.⁴

The Probation Department partnered with the Northern California Construction Training (NCCT) program and the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) to implement the program. NCCT is a nonprofit community-based organization that trains people for careers in construction trades. NCCT partners with local labor unions to provide training and facilitate job placement. SCOE is a government agency that oversees all school districts in the county, directly educates more than 30,000 adults and children in 13 school districts, and provides educational instruction through several programs throughout the county.

Research shows that this approach of combining multiple program components (e.g., education, vocational training, job placement) to achieve employment goals with this population yields positive results (Duran et al., 2013), suggesting that the CTP program was following evidence-based practices. Furthermore, in 2016, the CTP program received an innovation award from the California State Association of Counties.

Against this background, a RAND research team was prompted to investigate the program. We reached out to the Sacramento Probation Department, and it agreed to collaborate on an assessment of the development and effectiveness of the CTP program. As we note in this report, the latter goal of assessing effectiveness was not possible because of data limitations.

Case Study Methodology

To better understand the CTP program, we selected a descriptive case study design that included one formal site visit. Prior to the visit, we completed a brief review of literature on probationers' labor market outcomes and employment programs for people who have been incarcerated, including the CTP program. In addition, we engaged in a brief information-gathering telephone interview with leadership at the Probation Department and one informal advance site visit on January 26, 2017. During the advance site visit, we met with the NCCT leadership and the SCOE instructor to discuss specific program activities, program flow, key stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, and availability of data. In addition, we decided on site visit activities—including interviews, focus groups, and observation of program activities—and we began developing the recruitment plan and finalization of the data-collection protocols.

Site Visit

A team of two researchers conducted a two-day site visit on March 27–28, 2017, which included semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and observation of program activities. Topics discussed during the interviews and focus group included the following:

- program motivation
- planning
- implementation
- program facilitators
- program barriers
- program perceptions
- probationer experience
- lessons learned/recommendations
- data/outcomes

Interviews

Thirteen individuals participated in ten interviews that ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the interviewee's role and the number of interviewees in the session. Specifically, we interviewed two members of Probation Department leadership, the probation liaison, three probation officers, one NCCT leader and one vocation course instructor, one SCOE leader and one education course instructor,

two trade union representatives, and one construction firm representative. All interviews were audio-recorded, with verbal consent from the interviewees, to supplement the interview notes.

The Probation Department and NCCT identified potential interviewees and coordinated the scheduling for most of the interviews. Contact information for construction and union representatives who were interested in participating in the study was provided to RAND staff, and we directly contacted these individuals to schedule the interviews.

Focus Group

We hoped to conduct two focus groups: one with probationers who were currently or previously enrolled, and another with probationers who never started the program or who started but stopped. We conducted a 60-minute focus group with 11 current or past CTP program participants, including three women and eight men. We scheduled a focus group with probationers who had dropped out or never started the program, but no one attended.

Focus group participants received dinner and a \$15 gift card incentive for participation. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed, with verbal consent from the participants, to supplement focus group notes.

The Probation Department used multiple strategies to recruit participants for the focus groups, including posting flyers at the Adult Day Reporting Centers (ADRCs) and the NCCT office, distributing flyers to current students, and two rounds of phone calls and/or emails to probationers who fit the criteria for the focus groups. RAND provided the flyers and draft language for recruitment phone calls and emails. Probationers were invited to call a toll-free number provided by RAND to register for the groups. We called registered probationers the day before and the day of the focus group to remind them of the event.

Observation

We observed a short portion of the vocation course, including classroom lecture and hand-on practice in the workshop. Before the observation, we reviewed the oral consent form with the students. We did not engage the students during the observation; rather, we

observed activities from a reasonable distance to minimize distraction. In addition, we took unstructured, hand-written notes documenting training activities.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Using Microsoft Word, we coded interview and focus group responses according to key themes and analyzed data according to interviewee characteristics. Study findings and recommendations emerged from this analysis.

How Was the Program Developed and How Does It Operate?

Our site visit began with an exploration of the impetus for developing the CTP program. This provides a better understanding for why particular services are included in the program. We then asked the various stakeholders a series of questions about the program drivers, the structures put in place, and the process for establishing the program (e.g., partnership agreements, program selection, and resources). We provide details on the planning behind setting up the CTP program.

Motivation for Establishing the Program

Per our interviews with program staff, there were three interrelated reasons for establishing the CTP program: (1) the desire to help this population, (2) the probationers' need for training and education, and (3) the relative lack of similar programs.

The desire to help probationers was articulated by an NCCT staffer who explained that the program is “[o]ne more way to help people who need a hand up, not a handout.” Not only did probationers need help securing employment, but they also would benefit from quality employment. A Probation Department staff member said,

[W]e knew we needed to have a better employment program, because the current things we were doing—not only were the jobs not real meaningful and the fact that pay wasn't really high, minimum-wage type jobs—it wasn't

appealing to some of the folks we were supervising. It was appealing to us that this could be a more meaningful union job, a career instead of a job.

Based in part on results of the Level of Service–Case Management Inventory (LS-CMI) (Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith, undated)—a risk and needs assessment conducted at intake—the Probation Department also determined that probationers’ limited education and work skills were barriers to employment and that probationers needed access to vocational training and general education to help them obtain a high school diploma or equivalent.

The Probation Department also felt that education and training offered probationers an opportunity to engage in prosocial activities that might reduce recidivism and aimed to engage probationers in up to 35 hours of prosocial activities per week. For convenience, a one-stop approach was adopted to allow probationers to receive both vocational training and education in the same place. A representative from SCOE pointed out that, “[I]f we can get clients to come here, it just makes it easier. Get their education, get their vocational training. If they’re here, they’re around a lot of other positive things.”

Another critical driver for establishing the CTP program was the absence of existing programming to adequately address the needs of this population. Internally, employment services are available to probationers at the ADRCs. The Probation Department

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provides most probation services through its three ADRCs located in the northern, central, and southern regions of the county. The ADRCs are for probationers assessed as being at moderate to high risk for recidivism. Based on the probationers’ assessed needs, ADRCs offer a four-phase program over nine to 12 months with up to six months of post-care (Sacramento County Community Corrections Partnership Committee, 2014). According to probation officer interviewees, ADRC employment services typically resulted in low-wage temporary jobs, rather than careers. In addition, there were no comparable training programs available in the community for all probationers. Two similar programs that existed in the area, Conservation Corps and Job Corps, have a maximum age cut-off of 24 or 25 years old. Furthermore, Job Corps does not allow individuals with violent felonies, which limits access for certain probationers.

Partnership Agreements

While all partners had not worked together in the past, some had prior relationships. SCOE has worked with both NCCT and the Probation Department for many years. An NCCT staffer told us that “SCOE’s been a longtime friend . . . for over 20 years.” Similarly, the Probation Department told us that it has had a long-standing relationship with SCOE, primarily related to SCOE providing education services to juvenile offenders. SCOE’s positive relationship with NCCT and the Probation Department facilitated a relatively seamless joining of the three entities.

The program was initially set up through a contract between the Probation Department and SCOE, with SCOE subcontracting the vocational training piece to NCCT. Later, the contracts were split, so that the Probation Department now has a contract with SCOE for education and NCCT for vocational training. According to partner interviewees, this change allowed the Probation Department to have greater flexibility and transparency with each of the agencies.

NCCT also leveraged its formal and informal relationships with unions and construction firms for the CTP program. These relationships often involved unions or firms providing specialized training to CTP students, recruiting CTP students for job

opportunities, and working with CTP students on volunteer construction projects in the community, which exposed students to potential employers.

Program Selection

To determine what employment programming would be offered, the Probation Department discussed career interests with the probationers during informal encounters at the ADRCs. Many probationers expressed interest in construction and were working in similar jobs. Before making a final decision, the Probation Department examined the potential benefits of offering a construction training program. The most appealing aspect of the construction field was its relative openness to those formerly incarcerated and that a criminal history did not limit access to quality, stable employment.

In deciding which specific construction trades to include in the training program, the Probation Department started with those that NCCT already offered (e.g., carpentry, cement work, electrical, plumbing, painting, landscaping). Forklift and welding programs were added later, when additional resources were procured.

Resources

Funding for the CTP program is broken out by component: SCOE pays for part of the education component; the Probation Department pays for the other portion and for the vocational training. The Probation Department draws primarily on funding dollars provided through the California Community Corrections Performance Incentives Act.⁵ An important component of the education funding that was not part of the initial funding scheme is the average daily attendance apportionment, through which SCOE is reimbursed by the state for every 17-, 18-, and 19-year-old who goes through the education piece of the program. This remuneration to SCOE reduces the costs borne by the Probation Department, which is responsible for a variety of expenses, including the following:

- partial payment for education services provided by SCOE (i.e., one instructor)
- salaries for an instructor for the afternoon class of construction training and a probation

officer to be onsite at NCCT to act as liaison between NCCT/SCOE and the Probation Department

- infrastructure related to setting up the computer lab, installation of digital communication lines and other wiring and electrical
- items needed to set up the liaison's office (e.g., desk, office supplies, computer)
- a shuttle and driver.

NCCT contributes space for both the educational and vocational components of the program.

As the program expanded, additional resources were necessary. Specifically, in response to demand, NCCT added a separate welding training program for probationers in 2015. The Probation Department and NCCT evenly share the cost of the welding shop teacher for four hours. The equipment for the welding shop was repurposed from the Boys Ranch, a juvenile detention center that had closed in 2010. A Probation Department representative explained that there was “a significant amount of money tied into the equipment installed [at the Boys Ranch]. We were simply able to install [the equipment] here and start using it again.”

How Is the Program Implemented?

The CTP program began receiving referrals in December 2013. During the site visit, we interviewed program staff regarding program eligibility; program flow, including referral and intake; service delivery; and criteria for program completion. This chapter provides a review of the program eligibility criteria and each step in the program flow.

Eligibility

A probation officer explained that “the reality is NCCT has to be able to put their name behind someone they'll push to a union and that's a concern of [the unions].” With this in mind, probationers were required to meet the following criteria:

- age 17 or older
- in compliance with the conditions of probation

- no positive urine drug tests for at least 30 days (minimum two tests required).

Program participants were required to abstain from using drugs and alcohol,⁶ to be physically able and available to complete the vocational training, and to be willing to work as part of a team. Unless previously completed, probationers were also required to work toward a high school diploma or equivalent. According to program staff, arsonists and sex offenders are not accepted into the program.

When the program began, only probationers who were receiving services at the ADRCs⁷—moderate- to high-risk probationers⁸—and had completed a series of counseling classes were eligible for the program. This eligibility criterion has since expanded to include all supervised probationers. Interviewees suggest that most program participants are between the ages of 30 and 40 and have some experience in the construction field. Interviewees indicate that this is likely because of the early focus on high-risk probationers, an older group of probationers who had served some time in prison.

Referral and Intake

The referral and intake process includes several activities undertaken primarily by the Probation Department liaison. This process includes recruiting students, receiving and screening referrals (including self-referrals and referrals from nonprobation practitioners), processing student applications, and scheduling students for the next available course.

The majority of the probationers we spoke with indicated that they heard about the CTP program from their probation officers.

Recruitment

One approach to recruitment that the Probation Department takes is to promote the program by posting flyers and posters at every probation office, the drug court, and the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency. Interested probationers are directed to inquire about the program directly with their probation officers. Probation officers also reach out to potentially eligible students. The majority of the probationers we spoke with indicated that they heard about the CTP program from their probation officers. A few mentioned learning about the program from both their probation officer and flyers at multiple locations. Two participants heard about the program from the Sacramento Works Career Center. A third indicated that he was handed a flyer by a receptionist at a probation office.

The probation officers are selective about whom they recruit to participate in the program. As one explained, “We don’t want to throw someone in here and have it mess up the program for other people.” The probation officers said that substance abuse is a major concern, and they will not refer probationers to the CTP program unless they can “test clean.” One officer said that if a probationer expresses interest in the program, the probationer is made to wait 90 days to see how probation is going (e.g., is the probationer meeting the conditions of probation, testing negative on drug screening) to determine how interested he or she really is. Another probation officer concurred by saying, “If they’re going to wash out, why tank the program? You find out the ones truly interested in trying to make a change, then present them with this program.” Officers also noted that a particular background or interest in construction would be a reason to tell a probationer about the CTP program.

Referral and Application Processing

Referral submission is fairly easy and straightforward. The probation officer fills out the referral form, and both the probation officer and probationer are required to sign the form before it is submitted via fax or email. After receiving the referral, the liaison conducts a thorough screening of the probationer’s criminal record to confirm eligibility for the program. As part of this effort, the liaison

reviews the probationer's computerized case history, their California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation records, and the chronological case record from the probation officer's home or office visit. This process usually takes one or two days.

Once the liaison determines eligibility,⁹ the liaison asks the probationer to come to the NCCT office to complete an application form in person. During the in-person meeting, the liaison provides a detailed explanation of the program and shows the probationer around the facility.

The probationers we spoke with during the focus group emphasized the ease with which the referral and application process occurred. "There is no long process, long wait, none of that," one participant told us. "You just fill out . . . a little application and you're in," said another.

Scheduling Classes

If the probationer is *only* interested in the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET, formerly the General Educational Diploma [GED]) component of the program, and not the construction class (vocational) component, the liaison invites the individual to select a start date and informs the SCOE instructor. Participation in the education course by itself is very rare because there are many other adult basic education courses in the community. The education course can accommodate 25 students and the maximum capacity for the vocational course is 50 students.

Although probationers who enroll in only the education component can start attending classes at any time, the construction classes start monthly, so those who opt to take the vocational component along with the educational part could have to wait a full month to begin. For example, if the class starts the day before the application is submitted, the applicant will be invited to participate in the class that starts the next month. After processing the application, the liaison calls applicants to tell them when the next class starts. According to the probation liaison, about 25 probationers generally complete the application and sign up to start the next class, but only about half are present on the first day. Probation staff recognize that the wait time might contribute to attrition. The liaison tries to mitigate this issue by making

multiple phone calls to enrolled students to try to get them to attend the first class.

Service Delivery

Students can attend the education classes, vocational classes, or both. Some choose not to participate in the education component because they do not want or need to complete this course. The nine-month CTP program is scheduled Monday through Friday, with each day divided into two time blocks: 9:00–11:00 a.m. for general education instruction and 11:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m. for vocational training. A shuttle van picks up students twice per day at the three ADRCs and the Volunteers of America site, in the morning and in the afternoon. In the afternoon, students from the morning education class who are not enrolled in the construction course can continue working with the SCOE instructor. Instructors in both courses are flexible and seek to customize instruction to the students' individual strengths.

Program Completion

Students complete the education component of the program by passing the HiSET or earning their high school diploma. Completion of the vocational component requires (1) completion of the nine-month course, (2) acceptance into a union apprenticeship program, or (3) securing employment with a construction firm. Students who complete the program are invited to participate in a graduation ceremony in June of each year.

What Do People Think of the Program?

During the initial phase of this research, we investigated the possibility of conducting an outcome evaluation to provide evidence regarding whether the CTP program was successful at achieving its stated goals of providing necessary job readiness skills to probationers, connecting them with employment opportunities that they might not have access to without the program, and creating opportunities for probationers to earn a living wage in a stable job with a career path. We reviewed the data and considered causal inference

research designs,¹⁰ and we ultimately determined that the data did not exist to evaluate whether the program affects job readiness, job offers, or wages. Therefore, we took another approach of gathering qualitative information from all the stakeholders regarding their views on what does (and does not) work about the program.

Perceptions from Program Staff

Opportunities

CTP staff indicate that their strong partnership allows them to provide good-quality multidimensional education that helps students overcome personal and employer-driven barriers at no cost to the students. They believe that this ultimately helps probationers secure jobs that they otherwise would not have. Program staff indicate that the focus on employability sets the CTP program apart from other training programs. One staff member said,

[We're] three legs of the tripod, we can do a lot of work. A lot of people train. But the partnerships are key . . . we're going to teach the skills that they need to be successful and not just push them out the door . . . you can go to [another training program], and you have to pay. The CTP program is free to the student, [and the] certifications are free.

Program staff also stressed the value of filling a gap in employment services for formerly incarcerated individuals. One staff person said,

I haven't seen [a program] anywhere else in terms of helping people who have been incarcerated to achieve their goals, to get them in a career you can support a family on. It's a living wage they can earn. I've seen it change so many lives in the few years I've been here.

Challenges

In addition to program strengths, staff discussed a few implementation challenges. Early on, communication between NCCT and Probation Department staff was limited. Communication has improved over time; staff from all agencies meet more frequently now. Another issue raised was instructor quality and turnover in the vocational program. There was one instructor who was reportedly underqualified and

lacked the necessary experience and relationships with construction firms. Ultimately, the instructor was replaced, but only after students complained and even dropped out. Attendance levels have improved since the new instructor was hired. Finally, program staff note that student attrition is a major concern. One staff member said, "If 20 probationers are referred, ten will show up on the first day, and five will stay." The program continues to explore strategies to improve student engagement and retention.

Perceptions from Labor Unions and Construction Companies

Program Benefits to Employers

The union and firm representatives also spoke highly of the vocational training program and its students, indicating that the program addresses concerns typically expressed by employers. NCCT is lauded as a great establishment that does a great job of identifying what skills are needed in the local construction market and recommending workers who are a good fit. Comments about the vocational program emphasized that **the quality of NCCT-trained job candidates generally outweighed any perceived risk associated with their criminal backgrounds**. A union representative said that "from the perspective of organized labor, they know they're getting someone who is worth the trouble. They're always looking for good candidates. [NCCT] is a good conduit into the [union] apprenticeship program."

Union and firm representatives appreciated that NCCT students are work-ready—a primary goal of the program—and noted **the students' training in both hard and soft skills**. A union representative said that "the NCCT people know the proper attire, they look ready for work. I've got kids who come in and need to have their pants pulled up. I don't get that from NCCT. They're training them to be ready." Another comment from a union representative speaks to the value of NCCT training:

They get the classroom aspect, the paperwork, interacting with large groups, socializing, all that stuff. . . . All of those are advantageous. When they're filling out applications, new-employee packet, eight-hour orientations sometimes—that can be intimidating. I know

people who have left the trailer because the hiring process was intimidating. [I] haven't had that with NCCT. They're ready to go, can maintain themselves in any environment. Honestly, when I work with NCCT students, they're really eager to learn. They chose to go to this place for construction.

Probationers were also praised for being highly determined and grateful for the opportunity to be considered for employment. For example, a union interviewee said that “they're just soaking it up. For whatever reason, when I get to work with them, they want to learn. They're there for the right reasons.” Another union representative noted that probationers at NCCT say they are

extremely grateful that a program like this exists, where they can gain some experience to get into the workforce. Grateful that instructors are well educated in the construction field. It's a place for them to get established again in society and the workforce.

When comparing NCCT students with other workers, unions and firms noted that probationers perform at the same level or higher. A union representative said that NCCT students have more training than the average applicant and have a good understanding of the job expectations. This representative added that the construction trade is “a high-pressure, stressful jobsite situation. It's performance based. You've got to perform. [For] any individual, from NCCT or any other background, there's some shock.” However, “NCCT students . . . they're getting some training ahead of time. They have a pretty decent understanding of what they're getting into.” The overall sense is that NCCT students are capable of dealing with the demands of the field.

Employers Indicate Few, if Any, Concerns

When RAND researchers pursued questions regarding potential apprehensions about hiring individuals with felony convictions or about drawbacks of the NCCT program, union and firm representatives expressed little to no concern about NCCT students' criminal histories. As noted by virtually everyone who was interviewed, construction is a “felon-friendly industry.” While one interviewee from a firm said that the

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company considered doing background checks, it was decided that this type of screening was unnecessary. In fact, one firm emphasized that “some of our best employees here are ones who made one mistake,¹¹ did their time, and they're flourishing here.”

Perceptions from Probationers

During the site visit, we conducted an in-depth assessment of probationers' perceptions of the program through a focus group. We were interested in providing information specifically about their motivation to participate, their experience with the program, and their assessment of the program's successes and challenges.

Motivation

The CTP program was characterized by probationers as a pathway to securing stable, high-wage employment that could help them improve the quality of their lives. Probationers reported that they desperately wanted to get accepted into this program because there are so few like it. The probationers were very concerned that having a criminal record is a major obstacle to getting a job. As one probationer explained, “I've spent most of my life in prison. So, for me, having the felonies that I have, it was next to impossible in getting a job.” Another probationer told us that the CTP program offers “the doorway . . . to a good job, good pay, benefits, and retirement . . . it's

hard to get that type of job with a record where you have union pay, full benefits, retirement. So that's what motivated me to get into the program."

Probationers also described the CTP program as a conduit for turning their lives around. One probationer said,

When I came back [from incarceration], I was done, I was ready, I was tired of being locked up, tired of living the lifestyle that I was living. So, I was promised by coming into this program that if I just put the effort and sit down and try to learn something that you don't know, that your life is going to change.

It is perhaps worth noting that desire for change might be a factor in successfully completing the course(s) and obtaining a job. Program participants should be considered a positively selected group of probationers, and a future evaluation of the program would need to take into account the voluntary nature of the program (for example, by conducting a randomized controlled trial).

CTP Program Strengths

While some probationers reported difficulty learning about the program, there was unanimous agreement that the enrollment process was very simple. One

The probationers we spoke with felt that the CTP program changed their lives by providing the skills, training, connections, and ancillary supports necessary to help them get jobs in the construction industry.

probationer said, "You show up;" another continued, "[And] you're in!" All probationers who participated in the focus group were or had been in the vocational course, and almost half of them had been or were currently enrolled in both the educational and vocational classes. Most of these individuals were working toward completing the HiSET. One student, however, received his GED many years ago but was still taking the education class in the morning to brush up on the math skills required for the trade.

The probationers we spoke with felt that the CTP program changed their lives by providing the skills, training, connections, and ancillary supports necessary to help them get jobs in the construction industry. One probationer said,

Coming to this program gave me an opportunity to get into a union and just go from there. It taught me some skills and stuff like that; skills that I mean I already had, but [also] skills that I didn't have. This program right here, it just taught me a lot of stuff that I needed to know to be out there in the workforce. Today I can fill out an application and a résumé and stuff like that." Another said that "not only do they support and help you find a job that will hire you, they do everything they can to make it possible. The reason I get here, they give me bus passes, boots, they give me free tools. They even pay my [union] dues to get in.

In addition, probationers reported that the program helped them experience improved self-worth. One probationer said "[there's] a sense of accomplishment for me. And NCCT gave me that kick start. By coming here, I was able to fulfill what I wanted." Similarly, another probationer said that he got "a sense of worth and I feel like I'm doing something. Another job, I probably would have got low paychecks and then start relapsing. But at this place, man, it gives me self-worth." Many told us that they thought they would be in a much worse situation without NCCT.

Probationers also praised specific aspects of the program, including high-quality instructors and NCCT's positive reputation with unions, firms, and instructors. This trust in the NCCT program is also afforded to NCCT students. One student told us that firms

know that you know a little bit about everything and if you graduated, then you are a hireable asset to their company. That's why they come and touch base with these instructors and check out the groups and the guys that are working hard and the guys that are passing their tests.

Probationers also valued the fact that the program is free.

Potential CTP Program Weaknesses

Some probationers, specifically low-risk offenders, reported difficulty learning about the program. This was likely a result of the program's initial focus on moderate- to high-risk probationers. The other negative comment by some of the probationers about the program content and delivery focused on staffing levels. Specifically, one probationer indicated that sometimes the instructor is spread thin, and that "[this] leaves room for these characters to go screwing around somewhere because the instructor is over there teaching somebody something and they're out back smoking or something when they should be in here at the table doing their math or whatever."

What Did We Learn and What Are Our Recommendations?

By analyzing the qualitative data collected, we identified several factors that were perceived to facilitate positive program implementation, as well as variables that hindered implementation. Here, we list program facilitators and barriers that were articulated by the various stakeholders. Recommendations to overcome the barriers are also provided.

Seven Program Facilitators

For probation agencies interested in developing a similar program or policymakers considering funding a similar program, the following seven points were consistently mentioned by probation staff, union representatives, construction company staff, or probationers as reasons why they believe the CTP program was established and continues to operate to date.

Probation Agency Should Partner with Unions and Companies

Program staff consistently indicated that **developing and leveraging relationships with service providers and local employers ensures that probationers have access to a full range of support.** Although they had not worked together in the past, CTP partners have established a strong working relationship over the course of program implementation. Each partner organization understands its role and contributes necessary supports to probationers' skill development and job readiness. In addition, the partners leverage their individual relationships with external contacts to benefit the program. For example, NCCT uses its relationships with firms and unions to secure job placements for probationers.

Vocational Training Program Must Have an Established, Positive Reputation

Evidence gathered during this study finds that the **establishment and maintenance of a positive reputation with prospective employers ensures ongoing job opportunities.** NCCT is well known by construction firms and unions for training work-ready construction workers. It invests in understanding the skills required by potential employers and tailors the training program to meet these needs. In addition, through stringent eligibility criteria, NCCT aims to enroll quality candidates and only refer high performers to potential employers. As a result of NCCT's positive reputation among firms and unions, NCCT students are presumed competent and capable of fulfilling work requirements, apparently outweighing any stigma against the students' criminal backgrounds.

Program Staff Should Include Highly Skilled Instructors and a Dedicated Intake Coordinator

Our research shows that the **use of highly skilled instructors and dedicated staff allows for customized instruction and readily available support.** The partnership learned the value of highly skilled instructors over the course of implementing the program. Both the current SCOE and NCCT instructors have extensive experience in their respective fields and are able to modify existing curricula to meet student needs.

In addition, the NCCT instructor we spoke with has been able to draw from his experience working in the field to simulate a real-world environment in class. As a result, students are more aware of what to expect on a construction work site. It was also critical to have a dedicated, full-time program liaison to coordinate the referral and enrollment process and facilitate communication among the various partners. This contributed to the ease with which probationers were able to enter the program and promoted collaborative problem solving among the partners.

Budget for Supplies and Ancillary Support for Probationers

Probationers have limited resources to purchase items necessary to participate in construction training. The program provided probationers with clothes and work boots, tools, tool belts, and more. The program also helped students who entered the union apprenticeship program pay their union dues.

Use Program Champions to Help Recruit, Retain, and Inspire Students

Former CTP participants are often invited back to class to share their success stories. NCCT hosts events where these students talk about their journey from prison to superintendent, foreman, journeyman, or contractor. Probationers appreciated hearing from their peers firsthand that it is possible to obtain high-wage, secure, union jobs after completing the program.

Refer Probationers Who Are Willing to Invest in the Program

Consistent with other research (Duran et al., 2013), program outcomes appear to be better for probationers who are determined to change their lives and get a good job. Many staff members and probationers noted that probationers 30 and older seemed tired of their former lifestyles and were genuinely ready for a change. Probationers who are forced to participate ultimately drop out of the program. One staff person said, “Some people have drive to do it. Some have to be forced. If we have to force them, they’re not going to do it.”

While this may not seem ideal from a research point of view (e.g., selection bias), our study finds this is important to union and company involvement in the program and willingness to hire program participants. Therefore, it is important for the outcome of probationers in need of a program. Researchers could instead randomly assign probationers to different programs and study the impact of the CTP program relative to other options. We would not recommend a waitlist approach given the current observation that waiting even a few weeks results in some attrition.

Select a “Felon-Friendly” Career Field

Everyone agreed that probationers’ criminal records did not appear to limit their access to careers in the construction field, and the CTP program in construction levels the playing field for probationers. As one probationer said, “In the field of construction, they don’t care about your criminal background. They want an able body that can go with skills that can go set forms or pour some concrete or chip away some concrete, or maybe run a little bit of electrical. They don’t care about your background.” Given this environment, probationers were able to access high-wage, secure job opportunities.

This is consistent with other research. One explanation for why technically qualified people with criminal records have poor economic outcomes is that employers have a preference, or taste, for certain groups over others, so even highly qualified people with criminal records might have difficulties being hired, a theory known as *taste-based discrimination* (Becker, 2010). Because it is relatively costly for individuals who have been incarcerated to pursue jobs in felon-unfriendly industries, Fryer and Levitt (2004) recommend that these individuals avoid these employers and only seek jobs open to hiring formerly incarcerated persons.

Six Program Barriers and Recommendations to Overcome Them

It is important to be aware of potential challenges to program implementation to mitigate risks of a program closing or failing to help the probationers as intended. The following six points were consistently

mentioned by probation staff, union representatives, construction company staff, or probationers as perceived barriers of the CTP program.

Probationers Commit Time to Training but Are Not Paid

Some probationers might be unable to commit up to nine months to an unpaid program. Probationers have very limited, if any, financial resources and many are responsible for their families, meaning that they often must work during their participation in the CTP program. However, it can be difficult for them to find positions that will work around the program schedule. One probationer articulated this point, stating, “Because I’m trying to live on my own and trying to come here, which during the day I’m here . . . I gotta find like a graveyard job to get by month to month.”

Recommendation: Explore funding opportunities to support a subsidy or stipend for program participation. This work incentive model has proven to be effective at improving retention (Berlin, 2000).

Probationers Have Multiple Demands from Probation

Juggling competing demands might affect program participation and subsequent job retention. Probationers are required to meet several conditions of probation, which could include meeting with probation officers, attending counseling or personal development classes, and drug treatment. Sometimes these activities conflict with the CTP program schedule, causing probationers to miss their training classes and possibly drop out of the program. If construction firms or unions are onsite or call the program to recruit job candidates and probationers are absent, they miss an opportunity to secure employment. One staff member said, “If they’re not in those seats, we won’t recommend them.”

Recommendation: Improve coordination between the probation officers and program staff to minimize student absenteeism. Develop a retention program that includes following up with probationers during the program and after job placement. Identify and address reasons for discontinued participation (Duran et al., 2013).

Probationers Have Transportation Constraints

Limited transportation options make it difficult for probationers to attend classes. The CTP program offers bus passes to probationers, as well as shuttle service from four locations. However, as some probationers live on the outskirts of the county, their commutes to the training site or to one of the shuttle pick-up sites might be very time-consuming. One probationer indicated that his commute takes two hours one way.

Recommendation: Increase shuttle pick-up locations to include some remote options. Offer additional alternative modes of transportation (e.g., taxi service, ride-share). Supportive services, such as transportation, are critical to program engagement and completion (Gibson, 2000).

Probationers Have Suspended or Revoked Driver’s Licenses

Probationers might not have valid driver’s licenses, which can limit job opportunities. Many jobs in construction require employees to have a valid license. A significant number of probationers have suspended or revoked driver’s licenses, generally resulting from traffic infractions or child support issues. The costs associated with ameliorating these issues can be prohibitive, resulting in fewer job options for those probationers. The CTP program has helped some probationers resolve these issues.

Recommendation: Identify funding sources and support services to assist probationers with addressing their driver’s license issues. This also could include collaborating with the Department of Motor Vehicles to identify a way to address the needs of probationers while still attending to the initial reason for the suspension or revocation.

Probationers Need to Address Substance Use Disorders

Substance use drives down recruitment and retention rates. Probation officers do not refer probationers who are unable to pass two consecutive drug screens. The recent legalization of medical marijuana and permitting dispensaries was particularly problematic. One staff member explained that “when marijuana [use] was legalized here [in California],

clients felt it included everything [i.e., all drugs].” Fewer probationers were eligible to get in or stay in the program as a result. This is the main reason cited for not referring probationers to the program.

Recommendation: Consider partnering with a drug treatment program to provide onsite services to prospective and current program participants and help them address issues with substance use. While these services are available in the community, having an onsite provider might encourage participation by eliminating the logistical barrier.

Program Needs Probationer-Level Characteristics, Services, and Outcomes

A limited probationer-level outcomes data set hampers the program’s ability to track progress. In January 2016, the Sacramento Probation Department developed a program-specific database to capture cumulative data on completed applications, student attendance in each course, certificate completion, graduation, job placement, and more. However, these counts are not unique, so it is not possible to track the progress of individual probationers from referral to program completion or dropout. In addition, other important outcomes—such as recidivism, job placement type and wage, and barriers to employment (e.g., transportation, substance use, issues with driver’s license)—are not tracked. It would be useful to know program outcomes by probationer risk level to determine whether certain probationers are more successful than others.

Recommendation: Continue to build out the Probation Department database in a way that captures individual-level data that will help better measure program progress. A comprehensive data management system will provide valuable information about program effectiveness that might be used for continuous quality improvement and leveraged to increase support for the program (Gibson, 2000).

Conclusion

Without the data needed to evaluate the impact of the program on probationers’ outcomes, this study focuses on the implementation of the CTP program and perceptions from various stakeholders. The

CTP program seeks to connect probationers with construction jobs, which are known to offer greater wages than probationers would typically earn otherwise, and thus help probationers achieve greater income equality and reduce recidivism. More than three years of implementation have yielded a wealth of qualitative information about the CTP program’s operations—delivery of job readiness and placement services—and the process of linking some probationers to relatively high-paying jobs.

Qualitative evidence suggests that program participants believe the program increases their human capital (by receiving quality education, vocational training, and work experience) and social capital (by connecting them with program staff and prospective employers). This positions probationers to compete for well-paid construction jobs. In addition, based on relationships with NCCT and work experience with probationers, unions and construction firms are willing to accept the risk associated with hiring CTP program participants because they are confident that these individuals are work-ready—well-trained, reliable, and productive.

Understanding the inner workings of this innovative program, its perceived value, and its implementation challenges is a preliminary step to determine whether further evaluation of the CTP program is warranted (Chen, 2005). The stakeholders we interviewed—program staff, unions and firms, and probationers—generally viewed the CTP program as achieving its goals, including providing necessary job readiness skills to probationers, connecting them with employment opportunities that they might not have without this program, and creating opportunities for probationers to earn a living wage in a stable job with a career path. The CTP program shows promise, and with improved tracking of outcomes and services, it will be ready for a rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness at reducing recidivism and improving employment outcomes for probationers. An essential focus of a rigorous outcome evaluation in the future would include outcomes after two years because there is research showing that employment-related programs can improve outcomes in the short or medium term (e.g., less than one year), but the benefits may not last (Wiegand et al., 2015).

Notes

¹ *Standard conditions* of probation are those that are required for all probationers regardless of the level or type of crime.

² *Special conditions* of probation are imposed based on the type or level of crime or are related to offenders' circumstances.

³ This rate also includes misdemeanor cases supervised by private companies. Idaho has the next-highest rate, 3,070 per 100,000 adult residents.

⁴ Gaining an education is important for keeping probationers from falling behind—particularly in Sacramento, which falls in the upper-middle range of educational attainment for California: Between 2011 and 2015, 28.8 percent of adults 25 and older had completed college (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2017). Probationers also might need support to gain employment in Sacramento. The unemployment rate in 2015 was 6.0 percent—slightly higher than the national average of 5.26 percent.

⁵ The California Community Corrections Performance Incentives Act (Senate Bill 678) aims to reduce overcrowding in correctional facilities and to decrease correctional spending by reducing recidivism among probationers. Counties that successfully reduce

probation failure rates share in the savings that the state accrues from reduced incarceration costs.

⁶ Students are subject to drug testing during the program. After the first positive test, they lose their privilege to work in the construction workshop. A second positive test could result in termination from the program. Program termination is determined on a case-by-case basis.

⁷ ADRC services are provided by a mental health clinician, registered nurse, and benefit eligibility specialist and include cognitive behavioral programming, education, housing referrals, vocational training, and job placement (Sacramento County Community Corrections Partnership Committee, 2014).

⁸ Risk levels are determined during intake into probation using the LS-CMI. All probationers referred to as moderate- to high-risk probationers are either under Post-Release Community Supervision or mandatory supervision.

⁹ Approximately 55 percent of referred probationers are deemed eligible to complete an application.

¹⁰ Given study time constraints, a randomized controlled trial design would not have been a possibility at that time.

¹¹ CTP students might have committed more than one offense.

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About This Report

This report is part of a larger RAND project aimed at addressing income inequalities faced by workers with criminal records. Given the labor market challenges faced by people with criminal convictions, it can be difficult for probation agencies to help their clients find jobs, let alone earn living wages. This report summarizes findings from a descriptive case study of one program intended to improve the earning potential of individuals on probation in Sacramento County, California. Findings of this report should be of interest to three key groups: organizations involved in the case study program; legislators designing and/or funding policies and programs for the reentry or reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, professionals involved in those programs, and probation and parole agency officers; and employers and employment agencies. The research protocols employed in this study were approved by the RAND Institutional Review Board.

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For more information on RAND Labor and Population, contact

Unit Director
RAND Labor and Population
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
(310) 393-0411

or visit the Labor and Population homepage at <http://www.rand.org/labor>.



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