VOCATIONAL & LIFE SKILLS EVALUATION ANNUAL REPORT

Grant Cycle Four: Year Two

July 1, 2021
to
June 30, 2022

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH

SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ::

This report presents evaluation updates for the Vocational and Life Skills Program (VLS) for the second year of Grant Cycle Four (July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022). This report contains 1) the VLS logic model for grant cycle four, 2) a geographical spread of where providers offer services and/or programs, 3) a snapshot of participation across the programs, 4) recent trends in participations, 5) highlights from analyses examining employment, desistance and recidivism, and 6) overall initiative and individualized evaluation results into the first year of the current grant cycle. This report is collaborative in its presentation given that it is shared with NDCS administrators and funded program providers in the final drafts to ensure it is comprehensive in measurement, analyses, and result interpretations. Feedback and questions on this report can be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr. Ryan Spohn, whose contact information is on the back of this report.

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR), housed at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, has evaluated the VLS initiative since 2014. NCJR provides reports to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) regarding the implementation process and data updates on a monthly and quarterly basis. At the beginning of each grant cycle, NCJR collaborated with VLS service providers to create individualized evaluation plans with manageable goals contributing to VLS's overall goals. The intermediate goals of VLS have evolved over time and are currently focused on providing increased responsivity to individuals facing a variety of barriers and challenges to successful reentry.

Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) is part of a national company that provides trade-specific apprenticeship training and work-based learning opportunities for careers in the construction industry.

Bristol Station with the Western Alternative Corrections, Inc. allows formerly incarcerated individuals to transition into the community in a residential setting while providing opportunities of self-discovery and pro-social routine development.

Mental Health Association (MHA) provides peer-run behavioral and "wrap-around" support services that includes evidence-based programming and peer-group activities facilitated in residential and correctional settings.

Metropolitan Community College (MCC) is a public education institution that supports the 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) to provide education and work readiness training both within correctional facilities and on the Omaha campus.

Opening Doors is a program administered by the Center for People in Need (CFPIN). It provides comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high needs individuals in correctional facilities and at the CFPIN facility in Lincoln.

Project Reset is a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the qualified workforce in Nebraska that support formerly incarcerated persons in gaining and maintaining trade employment as they work towards a designated trade apprentice status.

ReConnect, Inc. offers short courses that balance life skills and cognitive restructuring techniques with employment training to help clients reach their full potential.
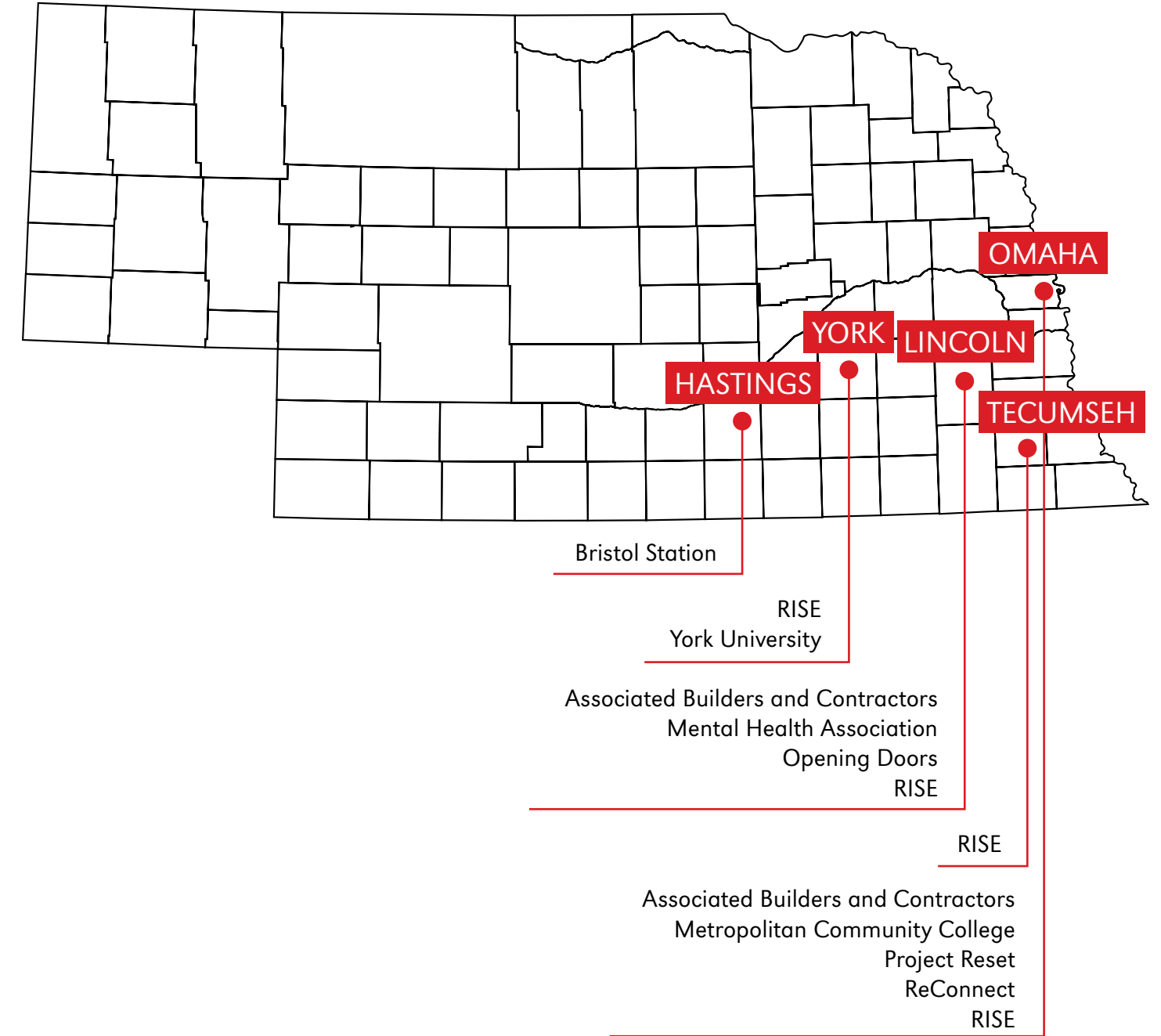
RISE seeks to end cycles of incarceration by equipping currently and formerly incarcerated people with job readiness, reentry planning, housing and employment pathways that help participants thrive.

York University is a private education institution that provides participants the opportunity to earn an Associate of Arts degree and prepares them for gainful employment using a spiritual approach to improve cognitive thinking skills and relationship skills.

OMAHA

YORK LINCOLN

HASTINGS

TECUMSEH

Bristol Station

RISE
York University

Associated Builders and Contractors
Mental Health Association
Opening Doors
RISE

RISE

Associated Builders and Contractors
Metropolitan Community College
Project Reset
ReConnect
RISE

THEORY OF CHANGE

NDCS seeks to increase the overall quality of life and meaningful employment among VLS participants, which can indirectly reduce recidivism.[1] Reentry programming reduces the barriers individuals face as they reintegrate back into the community, but the environments to which they return are often conducive to criminal behavior. Thus, programming alone is not a complete solution to recidivism, but it can equip individuals with valuable skills that can alleviate strain in the reentry process. The VLS initiative allows NDCS to fund nine service providers that support individuals during the reentry process. Some VLS providers focus on job training that has been demonstrated to increase earning potential and reduce economic strain. Others offer education that seeks to broaden individual perspectives, increase readiness for more advanced vocations, and increase self-efficacy. Finally, mental health is addressed by some VLS service providers to increase functionality and self-esteem. Collectively, VLS service providers deliver interventions intended to increase pro-social behaviors, confidence, competence, job skills, and social awareness.

Individuals chose to commit crime for a variety of reasons, such as having limited legal income or embracing anti-social attitudes developed as a juvenile.[2] Nevertheless, the decision to change one's lifestyle within the context of effective and available social support systems must happen for positive change to occur.[3] Sometimes interacting with others who have been successful in reentry can provide the motivation to change patterns of criminal behavior. Many VLS staff have lived-experience with incarceration and substance use, and those experiences often inform staff on ways to motivate participants and increase trust in the process of behavioral and lifestyle change. Once striving towards conformity, the likelihood of someone re-offending can and often does decrease.[4]

When the VLS program was initiated in 2014, lawmakers were discussing the importance of community supervision of persons released from prison. These discussions were informed by a Council of State Governments (CSG) study, which indicated that incarcerated persons with short prison sentences were often released from prison without community supervision. CSG's report also indicated that Nebraska lacked parole guidelines to ensure those convicted of serious felonies received community supervision.[5] Advocates of public safety suggest that a period of community supervision is a prudent component of the efforts to assist individuals making a safe transition, and is supported by empirical evidence.[6] However, the logic that community supervision increases returns to prison through these supervision efforts (e.g., drug tests, portable breath tests for alcohol, and home visits to check for weapons or criminal associations) is sound, and supported by considerable evidence.[7,8]

As a compliment to necessary community supervision, VLS programming generally uses a strength-based strategy to address client needs. VLS focuses on promoting meaningful employment through a variety of case management and supervision strategies. Some examples of supervision provided through VLS program offerings include highly structured residential placements; mental health-focused transitional housing; cognitive-based programs that address criminal thinking and promote pro-social thinking; vocational training programs that prepare individuals for careers in industry; and educational courses that promote individuals' educational and career goals. Although focus and dosage (or intensity) vary by program and individual, VLS grantees place individuals in supportive, pro-social environments that hold participants accountable for attendance and completion, while promoting cognitive and behavioral change targeted at meaningful employment and long-term community success.

Finally, in addition to improving the quality of life among participants and their families, increased employment rates among participants also benefits the state of Nebraska by reducing strain on general social services, by increasing tax contributions, and by contributing to safer communities.[9] The logic model on page four of this report illustrates this theory of change that is possible with the support of multiple agencies, employers, and service providers.

Theory of Change

Reentry programming can reduce barriers for justice involved

Increase skilled workforce in the state of Nebraska

Long-term Goals:

Increase overall quality of life among participants	Increase meaningful employment among participants	Decrease recidivism rates among participants

Grantee Outcomes

Increase Capacity	Increase Support	Increase Action

VLS Program Logic Model Grant Cycle 4 (2020-2022)

Input						
Legislative Funds	Physical Space	Equipment	Quarterly Meetings	Collaborate Services	Internal Evaluations	Evaluation Meetings

Participation

- ✔ Participants
- ✔ NDCS
- ✔ Probation
- ✔ Parole
- ✔ Grantees
  - ○ Administration
  - ○ Case workers
  - ○ Instructors
- ✔ Community partners
- ✔ Employers
- ✔ Evaluators

Activities

- ✔ Intake & assessment
- ✔ Training
  - ○ Vocational
  - ○ Educational
  - ○ Life skills
- ✔ Barrier assistance
- ✔ Basic need assistance
- ✔ Life coaching and case management
- ✔ Community networking facilitation

Outputs

- ✔ Case plans and leading measures
- ✔ Expanded skill set
- ✔ Degrees, certifications, or licenses earned
- ✔ Identification documents obtained
- ✔ Basic needs met
- ✔ Stabilizing factors maintained
  - ○ Housing
  - ○ Employment/education
  - ○ Mental health management
  - ○ Substance use management
  - ○ Family/ supportive relationships
- ✔ Increased
  - ○ Attitudinal scale scores
  - ○ Marketability
  - ○ Pro-social resolve
  - ○ Social supports
- ✔ Institutional navigation skills
- ✔ Employment obtained
- ✔ Increased pro-social connections
- ✔ Community integration

Hypotheses

1. Individuals at highest risk to recidivate will benefit the most from correctional programming.[10]
2. If individual barriers and needs are met, one's risk to recidivate will decrease.[11,12]
3. If population barriers and needs are adequately addressed, the percentage returning to prison within three years will decrease.
4. Increased education will increase likelihood of meaningful employment.[13,14,15,16]
5. Increased meaningful employment will decrease recidivism.[17]
6. Increased education will decrease recidivism.[18,19]
7. Increased health will decrease criminogenic behaviors.[20]

External Factors

+/- Peer Networks	Global Pandemic	Hiring Bias of Justice Involved

TYPES OF PROGRAMMING

This section categorizes VLS program offerings by the **types of skills they provide**.

In multi-site evaluations, a common method to improve the understandability of evaluation findings is to conduct a "common ingredients" procedure. This procedure categorizes intervention characteristics into groups (e.g., types of programs, mode of delivery, location of delivery). We chose to categorize our offerings by the types of skills they provide.[a] There were 8,593 program offerings included in this analysis.

We used Quickbase data for this analysis. Quickbase is the UNO-managed data system where VLS grantees input data on participants and program offerings. The dates of programming were used to limit the sample to Grant Cycle Four (July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2022). We only included offerings who started and ended within the two years of the grant cycle and were marked "completed" to safeguard consistency in dosage within program offerings. Certain services without curricula were excluded to maximize understandability (e.g., we excluded orientations, initial calls, and basic needs provisions). While not all-encompassing of services VLS provides, we categorized **129 program offerings** into one or more of the categories listed above. Non-categorized offerings include the provision of basic needs such as work boots and toiletries, or temporary transportation.

To best categorize each offering, we needed to collect data from multiple sources. First, we surveyed program provider leads in December 2021 regarding their most utilized offerings as determined by the VLS annual report 2021 (2-8 offerings a piece). We asked leads to indicate which category each of their top offerings would best fit into. While helpful for the most utilized offerings, there remained many program offerings unaccounted for. To classify these, we examined the program offering descriptions provided in the most recent VLS evaluation quarterly report.

The result was a non-mutually exclusive categorization table of individual offerings.

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[a] While many categorization schemes for skills provision can be utilized, the literature broadly suggests the following: social skills (interpersonal skillset interventions), life skills (skills related to gaining and maintaining employment and housing, using technology, and state government requirements such as obtaining identification), education (secondary and higher education), vocational training (related to hard skills for the workforce), and criminogenic thinking. Research has found that addressing criminogenic thinking patterns and behaviors with cognitive-behavioral interventions is the most effective intervention in reducing recidivism. VLS currently directly addresses criminogenic thinking patterns and behaviors with only a few evidence-based interventions, thus we excluded them for parsimony. These interventions' effectiveness in achieving their curricula's stated goals and their coinciding fidelity to delivery are key foci of the upcoming year's evaluation.

## Table 1: Types of Program Offerings by Provider (July 2020 to June 2022)

Program Name	Social Skills	Life Skills	Education	Vocational Training
ABC	75	75	184	692
Bristol Station	187	137	0	62
MHA	874	598	0	0
MCC	148	152	911	255
Opening Doors	301	209	213	345
Project Reset	303	319	169	200
ReConnect	72	1,397	0	39
RISE	169	169	169	169
York University[b]	–	–	–	–
Total Program Offerings	**2,129**	**3,056**	**1,646**	**1,762**

[b] York University was not asked to complete the survey due to the absence of program offering endings during the grant cycle. However, York University's program consists of seven semesters of coursework in a secure facility (NCCW), where students learn study skills and communication skills and are provided with a general knowledge base and the opportunity to learn and practice job interview skills. At the program's conclusion, participants receive an Associate of Arts degree from the university. The curriculum addresses each of the four classifications utilized here.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Program staff collect and verify a variety of self-reported information from participants in their programs. In this report, we present select characteristics on VLS participants.
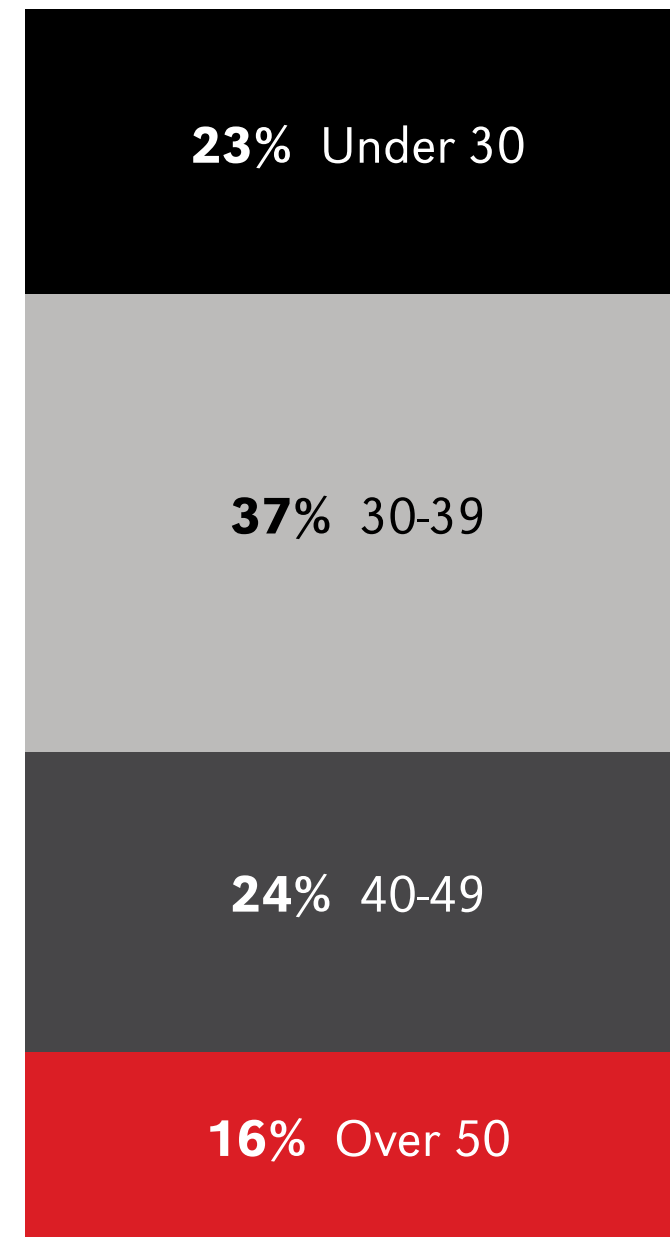
GENDER

83% Male | **17%** Female
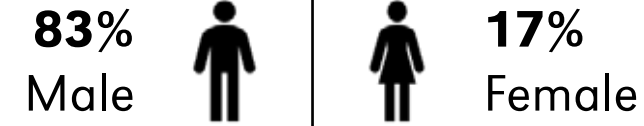
EDUCATION

About **12%** of VLS participants do not have a high school diploma or GED

AGE

23% Under 30
37% 30-39
24% 40-49
16% Over 50

RACE & ETHNICITY

27% Black
8% Hispanic/Latino
**12%** Other
53% White
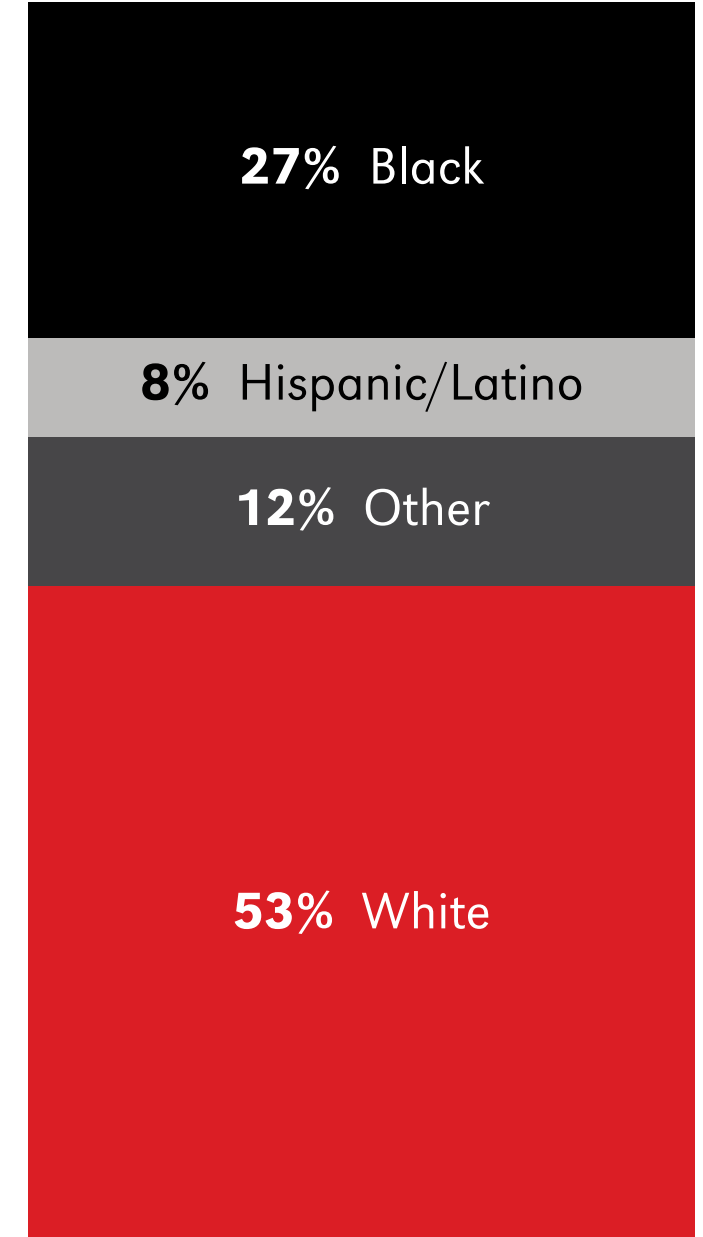
VLS PARTICIPATION FOR YEAR TWO OF GRANT CYCLE FOUR

There have been **2,408** successful completions out of the **3,200** VLS participations that ended in the second year of grant cycle four. Within those participations, **5,321** offerings were provided to participants across all programs. Participants are considered successfully completed when they meet all requirements set by program staff. Although most participants successfully completed programming (**75%**), others stopped for a variety of reasons: decided to leave on their own accord (dismissed by self), asked to leave by the program (dismissed by program), or other reasons (moved, referred to other agency, pandemic limitations, among other reasons). The average VLS participant completed programming within **138** days.

Table 2: Participations and Completions Counts by Provider

Program Provider	Year Two Total Participations[c]	Year Two Successful Completions[d]	Year Two Average Days to Successful Completion	Grant Cycle Four Total Participations
ABC	276	171	21	595
Bristol Station	72	36	176	137
MHA	563	331	157	949
MCC	881	780	274	1891
Opening Doors	303	252	51	419
Project Reset	182	102	80	219
ReConnect	732	696	30	1467
RISE	180	40	375	318
York University	11	0	NA	11
Total	**3,200**	**2,408**	**138**	**6,006**

PROGRAM COMPLETION STATUS

87% Successful Completion

8% Terminated by Self
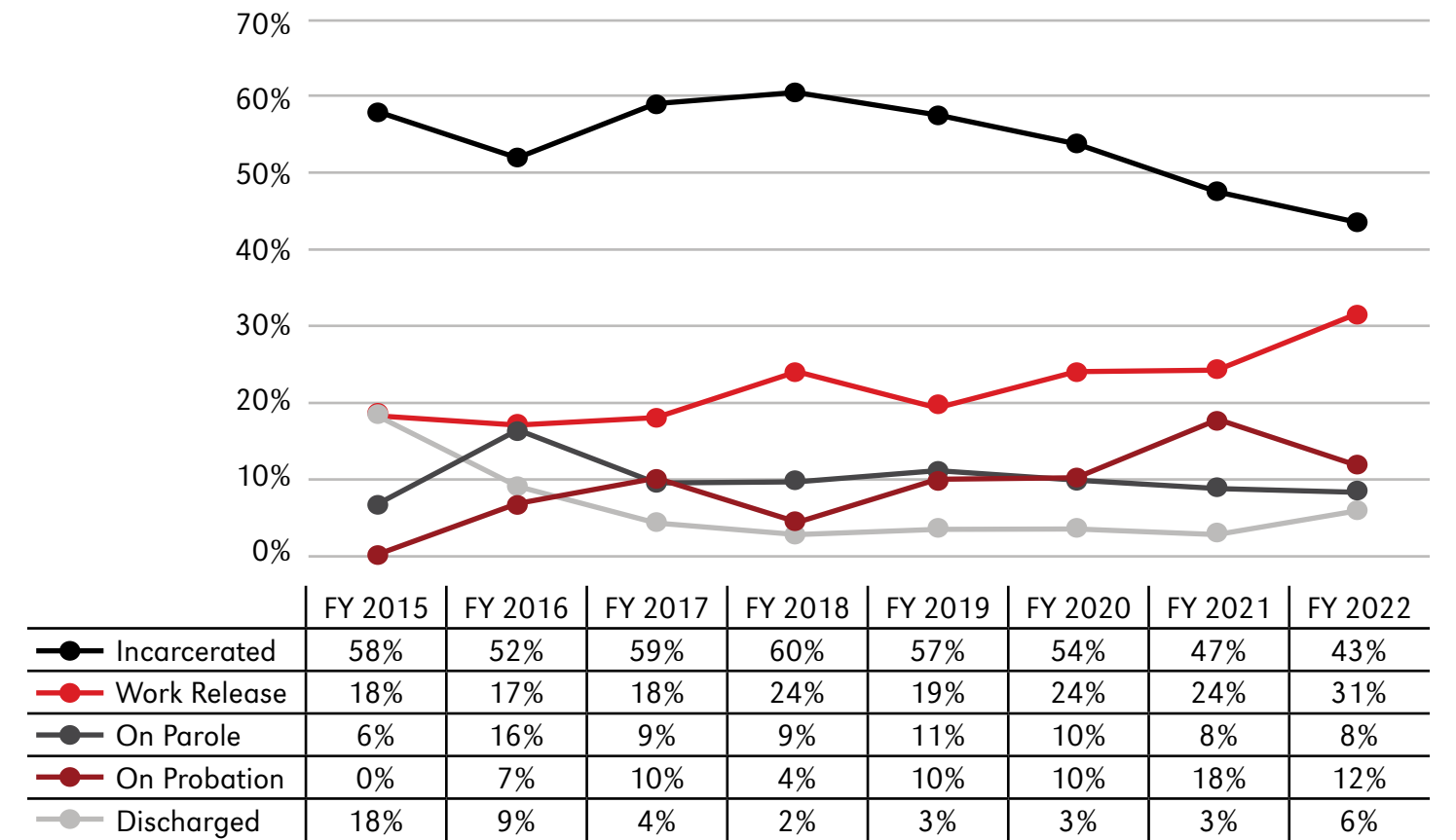
2% Terminated by Program

3% Other
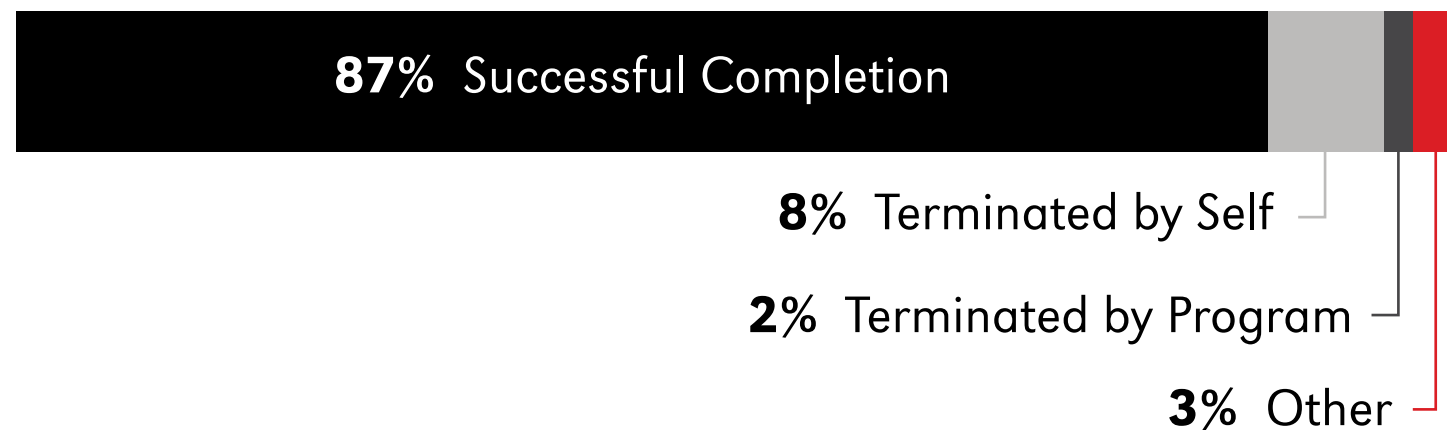
[c] **Total participations:** a count of participants that were actively participating in each program during the year.
[d] **Successful completion:** participants are considered successfully completed when they finish all program requirements developed by service providers and marked as completed upon program exit.
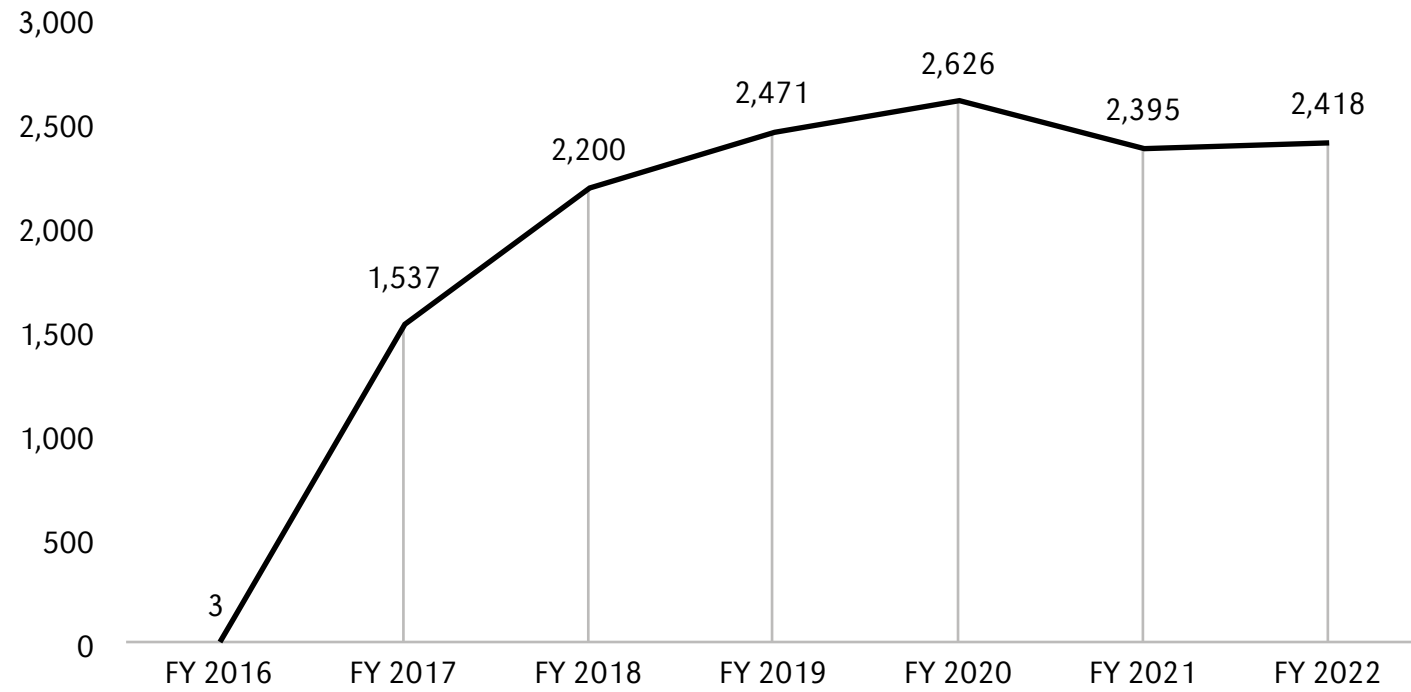
VLS OVER THE YEARS

INTAKE STATUS OVER THE YEARS

	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022
Incarcerated	58%	52%	59%	60%	57%	54%	47%	43%
Work Release	18%	17%	18%	24%	19%	24%	24%	31%
On Parole	6%	16%	9%	9%	11%	10%	8%	8%
On Probation	0%	7%	10%	4%	10%	10%	18%	12%
Discharged	18%	9%	4%	2%	3%	3%	3%	6%

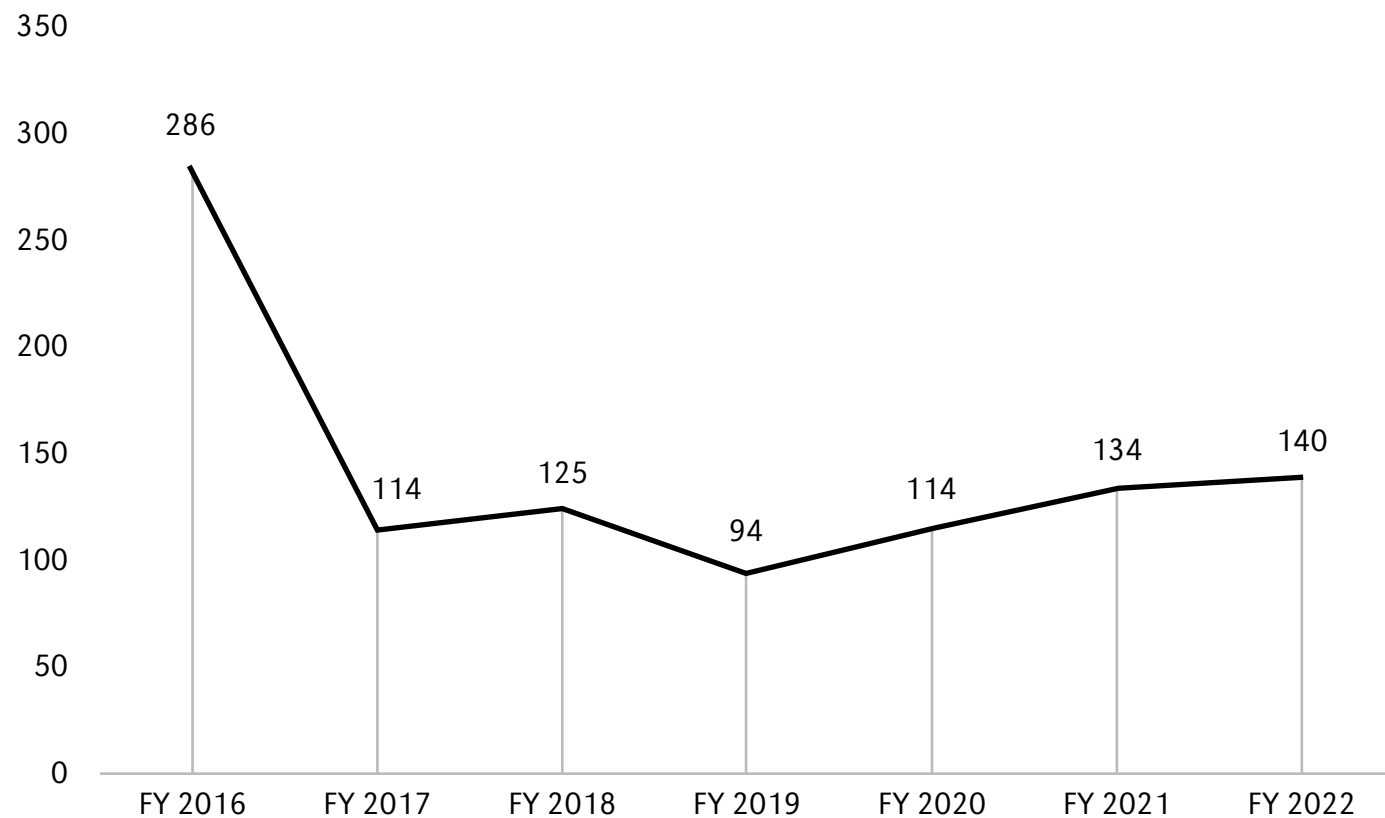[e] Fiscal year column totals above may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Successful VLS Program Completions Over the Years

Chart showing successful VLS program completions by fiscal year:
- FY 2016: 3
- FY 2017: 1,537
- FY 2018: 2,200
- FY 2019: 2,471
- FY 2020: 2,626
- FY 2021: 2,395
- FY 2022: 2,418

Average Days Until Successful VLS Completion Over the Years

Chart showing average days until successful VLS completion by fiscal year:
- FY 2016: 286
- FY 2017: 114
- FY 2018: 125
- FY 2019: 94
- FY 2020: 114
- FY 2021: 134
- FY 2022: 140

VLS EMPLOYMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Many of the VLS programs seek to increase marketable job skills or improve other life skills that help one be successful when employed. To assess the potential employment benefits associated with completing VLS programs, grant cycle four employment data provided by the Nebraska Department of Labor were merged with individuals released from NDCS facilities in 2019 (n=2,346). Consistent with previous employment outcome results, we find VLS participants are more likely to obtain and maintain employment and earn higher incomes relative to those that do not participate in VLS programs.

VLS participants were

18%

more likely to be employed

VLS participants earned

$2,311

more per year relative to non-VLS individuals

RECIDIVISM ANALYSIS ::

Recidivism, which is a broad term for continued criminality, is commonly assessed in justice evaluations seeking to understand an intervention's impact. In many instances, using a binary measure such as recidivism to determine program effects limits the ability of evaluators to make meaningful recommendations due to the many factors involved in a recidivistic event (see section titled "Desistance and Recidivism Considerations" in this report). Yet, researchers can use recidivism as a starting point for developing more nuanced and innovative program evaluation design. To practice this endeavor, we estimated VLS program effects on recidivism. To examine recidivism among VLS participants, the evaluation team obtained institutional data from NDCS, including releases, readmissions, and the NDCS risk assessment (Static Risk and Offender Needs Guide – Revised [STRONG-R]).

STUDY DESIGN

Since participation in VLS is voluntary and practitioners serving VLS generally provide needs-based services, an experimental design to study VLS's effects on recidivism rates was not feasible. Therefore, we conducted a quasi-experimental retrospective observational study to examine how programming affected returns to prison due to a new crime or revocation of parole.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected policy and practice in almost every aspect of life in Nebraska, including VLS's provision of services and NDCS's regular operating procedures. To limit complications associated with numerous policy and practice changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (post March 2020), we limited the follow-up period to 24 months rather than the standard for Nebraska – 36 months.

ANALYSIS PLAN

Considering the time required for a proper follow-up period, the fact that VLS has not been subjected to rigorous recidivism analyses in prior grant cycles, and that one goal of this study was to develop a procedure for future recidivism analyses, we examined outcomes for participants in prior grant cycles. Therefore, this is a historical analysis, not directly related to services reported in other areas of this report.[f,g]

POPULATION

The population for this examination included all individuals who were released from a facility between January 1, 2017 and December 31, 2018 (n=4,704 individuals). The following analyses compare recidivism rates between VLS participants and a control group of non-participants. It was determined that recidivism was best defined with this data as 'readmission to an NDCS facility within 24 months'. Defining recidivism this way captures both reincarceration due to new criminal acts and parole revocations.

FINDINGS

Approximately 35% of the sample participated in at least one VLS program. VLS participants recidivated at higher rates than non-participants. We interpret this disparity as evidence that the Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) model is being followed by NDCS case workers, NDCS reentry officers, and VLS program providers. The RNR model is the most established correctional framework in the field. It examines risk to prioritize supervision and treatment, needs to determine the most appropriate treatment/programming, and responsivity to ensure a strength-based case plan is developed to maximize the effectiveness of evidence-based programming. More specifically, the risk principle states that higher risk individuals ought to be prioritized for treatment/services. Indeed, almost 70% of VLS participants were classified as high risk by the STRONG-R risk assessment, compared to 63% for non-VLS individuals. Thus, when ignoring risk, VLS ought to have higher recidivism rates than non-participants. When accounting for risk, VLS would be successful if participants recidivated at lower rates than those with the same risk.

Because participation in VLS programming is voluntary, individuals that are more likely to volunteer for programming may have certain characteristics that influence their likelihood of recidivating beyond program participation. This means that participants likely differ in ways that affect the outcome of recidivism (e.g., risk score). To control for these differences, we employed a propensity score model (PSM) to balance the groups statistically. This procedure examines the participant group and only selects those non-participants who look like the participants – each group having a similar proportion of individuals with these potentially different characteristics.

We selected the groups based on the individual characteristics listed in the following table.[h]

Table 3: Variables Used to Match VLS Participants with Non-VLS Individuals

Basic Characteristics	STRONG-R Risk Assessment	
	Scales	Individual Items
Gender Binary	Aggression Needs Scale	Accepts Responsibility
Age at Release	Alcohol/Drugs Needs Scale	Behavior towards Authority
Release Type	Attitudes/Behaviors Needs Scale	Dealing with Others
Parole	Employment Needs Scale	Goal Setting
Post Release Supervision	Family Needs Scale	Impulse Control
No Supervision	Felony Risk Scale	Prior Employment Problems
Race/Ethnicity	Friends Needs Scale	Problem Solving Skills
Black	Residential Needs Scale	Readiness to Change
Hispanic	Violence Risk Scale	
Other		
White		

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[f] We examined basic contingency tables for base rate differences in recidivism across two groups: one that participated in VLS and one that did not. We then divided the population further by location where participants participated and examined the base rate differences.
[g] Next, we conducted a propensity score modeling procedure to minimize differences between groups, simulating random assignment. We used individual characteristics such as age, gender, and race. However, these basic characteristics are very broad and require supplemental measures to better balance the groups being compared. We used scales and individual items from the STRONG-R assessment. The STRONG-R is a validated risk/needs assessment to help correctional workers identify an incarcerated person's general needs so they may assign/recommend an intervention or treatment designed to address those needs. It is completed once at intake and once just prior to one's tentative release date.

[h] Following the PSM procedure, the disparity in recidivism rates between VLS participants and non-VLS individuals decreased considerably.

LOCATION ANALYSIS

We then calculated the extent to which VLS programming affected recidivism for three groups: 1) those who participated only in NDCS facilities (including the CCCL and CCCO), 2) those who participated only in community programs, and 3) those who participated both in NDCS facilities and in the community.

While VLS as a whole was found to not reduce recidivism, the in-facility-only sample showed that VLS reduced recidivism compared to non-VLS participants.[i] Non-participants recidivated at a rate of 25.9%, compared to 20.3% of VLS participants (OR=.636, p<.001). This coincides with a relative risk reduction of 30%. This is an extraordinary feat for VLS; and should be recognized as such by agencies and community partners across Nebraska. In-facility VLS programming works to keep people from returning to prison and should be fine-tuned to provide the services that matter the most.

PROGRAM OFFERING ANALYSIS

We then looked further into the types of program offerings that are more successful in reducing recidivism, in all locations/samples. To do this, we assigned individual program offerings into one of five categories, acknowledging that multiple offerings can be classified into more than one category. The assignment was based on the program offering description specified by VLS providers. We reviewed the descriptions and decided to classify based on what the offering's primary focus was. The categories we agreed upon were cognitive-based offerings, transitional offerings, work-related offerings, education-based offerings, interpersonal skills building offerings, and a broad category of "other" (which includes short trainings such as OSHA or personal provisions such as work boots). **For this facility-only sample, we found that education-based (Relative Risk Reduction 13%), work-related (Relative Risk Reduction 36%), and cognitive-based offerings (Relative Risk Reduction 31%) reduced one's likelihood of recidivism.**

The other locations of programming also showed promise, albeit to a lesser degree than in-facility offerings. For the community-only sample, work-related offerings were found to marginally reduce one's odds of recidivating. The sample that participated in both facility- and community-based programming also experienced marginally reduced odds of recidivating as a result of work-related and education-based offerings.

OTHER FINDINGS

We needed to include control variables in the multivariate models to properly examine VLS across location and type of program offerings. These additional variables included days in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic, risk level, and supervision type upon release. While these findings may or may not be important for VLS recommendations in the future, we report them in the sake of transparency. **The more days in the community during the pandemic one accumulated, the lower one's risk to be returned to prison.** This makes sense considering the nationwide initial push for de-densification of correctional spaces and the fact that the data ends during the beginning third of the pandemic.

Next, the three category risk measure was found to be accurate, stable, and a strong predictor of recidivism in all models. **Higher risk individuals were much more likely to be returned compared to moderate and low risk individuals, and moderate risk individuals were much more likely to be returned compared to low-risk individuals in all models.** We recommend that NDCS and VLS program providers continue to use the STRONG-R's risk classification to prioritize services.

Supervision type was also a strong predictor of recidivism, with parolees having a much higher probability of return when compared to Post Release Supervision (PRS) or no supervision. Considering the similarities of PRS and parole, we further examined risk level by supervision type. We found parole to have significantly fewer high risk individuals compared to PRS or no supervision. This nonsensical finding may be due to our current inability to separate technical violations from new crimes in the data provided by NDCS. We anticipate working with parole and NDCS to further understand this empirical finding.

CONCLUSION

These findings are in line with many prior evaluations on local or national levels regarding programming that focus on employment outcomes and utilize individualized case management as the primary intervention.[21,22,23,24] Reentry programming is important, but it should be done the right way to the extent that resources allow to ensure that positive results are not attenuated. Importantly, the location and type of programming matters. **We found that in-facility programming in general (and in-facility programming focused on education, cognition, and work specifically) reduced one's absolute probability of recidivating by approximately 5.6%.**

Other findings regarding the types of programming that need improvement were reported to the NDCS for further analysis. The evaluation team is excited to work closely with NDCS and VLS providers to minimize potential negative effects of VLS and maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of programs showing promise. While some reentry experts focus on identifying which interventions and practices are significantly associated with reductions in recidivism, others are moving away from using recidivism as a measure of success for various reasons, one being because it focuses on the population's 'failures' rather than its successes. With that in mind, we would like to point out that about 70% of individuals who participate in NDCS's VLS program remain out of prison for at least two years post release. We anticipate conducting a procedure for our next annual report that includes measures of decreased severity of crime committed, a decreased frequency by which one commits crime, and a technical violation rather than a crime committed.

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[i] To examine our VLS program offerings, we conducted doubly robust analysis using multi-variate logistic regression to control for characteristics not addressed in the PSM. These control variables included risk class from the STRONG-R (low, moderate, high) and whether one was released on parole or not. Other covariates were considered but did not improve the models' abilities to detect VLS effects, and thus were excluded.

DESISTANCE AND RECIDIVISM CONSIDERATIONS

This section reviews desistance and recidivism considerations that have the potential to improve VLS's outcome evaluation.

HIGHLIGHTS:
- Just because someone has not recidivated does not mean the person is doing well
- Recidivism analyses are limited in their ability to inform policy
- Desistance is a better criminal justice system outcome to examine
- Measures of desistance include:
  - Frequency of new charges
  - Seriousness of new charges
  - Time to new charges
  - Type of new charges

CONTEXT
LB 896 states that correctional program evaluations shall evaluate the quality of programs, which includes the program's ability to reduce recidivism. Most research evaluators examining recidivism use institutional administrative data to determine whether program participants are less likely to return to prison. This approach is limited however in that it does not capture whether there is a reduction of severity of crime or new offenses relative to parole violations. Reentry practitioners and researchers are now shifting from a goal of recidivism which is a singular event of return, to desistance which is a process away from criminal behavior. This shift also focuses on the desired outcome rather than waiting for the failure as is the case with recidivism. Below we have noted analytical considerations for both recidivism and desistance to provide our stakeholders with rich feedback about the outcomes of these programs.
- *Selection bias:* A randomized control trial or propensity score modeling techniques should be used to reduce selection bias in the analysis.
- *Time served:* Offenders serving longer sentences tend to have lower rates of recidivism.
- *Program completion:* To accurately capture the potential success of the program, an analysis should account for if participants were engaged and completed the program.
- *Time to rearrest:* Time till rearrest is a dependent variable that should be considered for desistance. Although program participants may not be completely equipped with all that is needed to successfully reintegrate, the length that individuals can be independently prosocial is a positive program outcome.
- *Most serious offense at rearrest:* Program participants may not stay crime free, but they may avoid more serious or violent offenses once equipped with coping skills. This would be another dependent variable that reflects desistance.
- *Quantity of offenses at rearrest:* A program may help individuals commit less offenses at the time of rearrest that could capture a positive outcome reflecting desistance.
- *Criminal justice system outcomes:* Institutional data provides system outcomes that reflect systemic discretion, legal statutes, and behavior of the individual. Any analysis using institutional data is limited in generalizability to the jurisdiction from which it was collected.

CONCLUSION
It is important to understand that outcomes such as binary recidivism are the result of an individual's behavior and the behavior of the many criminal justice system actors that have discretion to push a case forward. Criminal justice system outcomes are limited in their ability to examine one's quality of life and well-being – key components of remaining crime-free. Multiple other outcomes are planned to be examined for the new grant cycle. NCJR is excited to work with VLS providers and NDCS staff to enhance the quality of measures to be used as outcomes.

NDCS MEASURE RESULTS

NDCS administers the Vocational and Life Skills Grant funded through LB 907. They select who will be funded through the grant, as well as the overall initiative goals. On June 28, 2020, NDCS and the evaluation team developed an evaluation plan documenting these goals along with the processes underway to achieve them. The outcome and process measure goals from those plans are listed below for the first two years of grant cycle four.

Goals	Results
• ALL VLS evaluation plans be drafted by the end of the first quarter of the grant cycle	✔ 10 Evaluation plans were developed in the first quarter
• Five leading measures developed for NDCS	• Leading measures are being developed
○ 90% of participants will have earned at least one degree, certification, or license	○ **53%** of offerings result in a degree, certification, or license
○ 100% of participants will have identification documents needed for employment	○ Grantees report that **7%** of participants needed assistance obtaining identification ○ **36%** of VLS participants were released with identification needed for employment
○ 90% of participants with basic needs obstacles will report basic needs met at program completion	○ This measure was not able to be collected
○ 70% of participants will report high scores on the SSIdocuments needed for employment	✔ **74%** of participants report feeling socially supported
○ VLS participants will have higher rates of employment documents needed for employment	✔ **63%** of VLS participants relative to 45% of non-VLS obtained employment post-release
○ VLS participating parties will report increased collaboration	✔ **50%** of VLS participating parties reported collaboration increased
○ 79% of outcome evaluation goals will be met	✔ **80%** of outcome measure goals were met
○ 80% of participants report they would recommend VLS to others	✔ **91%** of participants would recommend to otherst
○ The VLS participation survey will have a response rate will be 60% or higher	○ The survey response rate was **23%** for GC4

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
○ 75% of participants will decrease their STRONG-R attitudes/behaviors needs score	○ **30.2%** of participants decreased A/B needs score compared to 33.2 % of non-participants[j,k]
○ 100% of outcomes on the multi-site evaluation will be collected and reported[l]	○ Data was collected for 85% of the outcome measures reported

ABC MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

ABC delivers pre-employment training, trade specific apprenticeship training, and work-based education courses with learning objectives tailored to participants with career goals in the construction industry. Service delivery is in facilities and communities across the state. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 8, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, ABC administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. ABC identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

ABC Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Applied Construction Math	19	0	32	51
Core	25	0	22	47
Electrical 1	8	0	18	26
Electrical 2	8	0	4	12
Electrical 3	0	0	1	1
HVAC 1	1	0	11	12
OSHA 10 Hour Construction	116	0	1	117
OSHA 10 Hour General Industry	72	0	3	75
OSHA 30 Hour Construction	35	0	4	39
Plumbing 1	2	0	5	7
Virtual Electrical	6	0	0	6
Total	**292**	**0**	**101**	**393**

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
○ Most (75%) participants will be confident in their abilities after program completion	✔ 84% of participants are confident in abilities after program completion
○ Most (75%) participants who complete programming will find employment	✔ 77% of participants who complete ABC programming obtained employment
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

BRISTOL STATION MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

Bristol Station provides program intervention and case management aimed to accelerate psychological and social development related to behavior and thinking. Service delivery is provided in a residential community located in Hastings, Nebraska. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 14, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, Bristol Station staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. Bristol Station identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

Bristol Station Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Anger Management	4	0	2	6
Conflict Resolution	35	11	22	68
Dress for Success	35	11	22	68
Employment Readiness	22	0	0	22
Family Reunification	12	0	3	15
Interviewing Skills	35	11	22	68
Job Coaching	35	11	22	68
Money Management	2	0	0	2
MRT	2	1	4	7
Relapse Prevention Group	14	0	7	21
Residential Reentry	47	11	12	70
Transitional Skills	21	2	9	32
Transportation Independence	18	0	0	18
Total	**282**	**58**	**125**	**465**

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
Decrease in pro-criminal attitudes/behaviors among program completers	34% of completers decreased pro-criminal attitudes/behaviors
Most (75%) will be satisfied with work	93% reported satisfaction with work
Most (80%) participants will report a belief in their own success at program completion	76% of participants reported a belief in their own success at program completion
Decrease in overall ORAS	75% of completers decreased ORAS
Increase in overall QOLI	78% of completers increased QOLI
Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

MCC MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

MCC 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) delivers student-centered education and cognitive-based interventions through case management to participants. Participants are provided work readiness and life skills training, direct services, and transitional support. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 15, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, MCC administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. MCC first described their services, population served, and agency goals. MCC then identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

MCC Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
3 MCC Core Courses	1	0	0	1
Associate's Degree	1	0	1	2
CDL	12	0	4	16
Forklift Certification	41	0	0	41
Four-Week Workshop	32	0	0	32
Long-Term Relief Group	6	0	0	6
MCC Credit Course	420	0	54	474
National Certification	2	0	0	2
Non-Credit Workshop	128	0	5	133
Orientation	721	0	0	721
Other Services	5	0	1	6
Total	**1,369**	**0**	**65**	**1,434**

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
Most Job Center participants will secure employment	88% of Job Center Participants gained employment
Most participants will be confident in abilities upon program completion	84% of participants reported confidence in their abilities post program completion
Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

MHA MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

MHA provides participants reentry case management focused on wellness and recovery. By providing intentional peer support, offering informed choice, promoting wellness, and encouraging hope, participants can increase their employment prospects and capacities to integrate into pro-social networks including family and various community organizations. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 8, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, MHA administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. MHA identified expected accomplishments in the upcoming grant cycle and their expected long-term impact on clients and the community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

MHA Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Benefits	4	0	0	4
HONU	72	7	21	100
Hope	212	54	15	281
Peer Prevention Group	232	0	0	232
Real	110	6	0	116
Total	630	67	36	733

Goals	Results
○ Most participants will maintain employment after release	✔ Half of participants maintained employment after release
○ Most participants will increase wellness and recovery attainment scale rating	✔ 93% of participants increased their wellness and recovery attainment scale rating
○ Most (80%) participants will report feeling socially supported at least half the time	✔ 79% of participants report feeling socially support at least half the time
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

OPENING DOORS MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

Opening Doors provides comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high needs families and individuals as they strive to lift themselves out of poverty and achieve economic self-sufficiency. Opening Doors case managers assign programming in line with participant needs and preferences to improve reentry transitions back into the community. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 14, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, Opening Doors administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. Opening Doors identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

Opening Doors Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Basic Computers	4	0	6	10
Computer Aided Drafting	4	0	0	4
Core Classes	97	0	19	116
Core Classes - In Facility	27	0	23	50
Family Support	2	0	0	2
Forklift & Warehouse Operations Module	41	0	9	50
Job Seek	92	0	1	93
Other Services	124	0	7	131
People Obtaining Prosperity (POP)	6	1	9	16
Tooling-USNE	18	0	5	23
Welding Module	35	0	10	45
Total	450	1	89	540

Goals	Results
○ Most core participants will find employment	✔ 78% obtained employment in year one and 67% obtained employment in year two
○ Most employed participants will have incomes above the poverty line	✔ Annual incomes for years one and two of grant cycle four are above the poverty line
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

PROJECT RESET MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

Project Reset out of the Nebraska Center for Workforce Development and Education (NCWDE) is a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the qualified workforce in Nebraska. Project Reset mentors justice involved individuals into life changing careers in the skilled trades and labor industry to bridge the gap of a qualified workforce and recidivism in our community. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on March 30, 2021, at Project Reset and included NCJR researchers, Project Reset administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. Project Reset identified expected accomplishments in the upcoming grant cycle and their expected long-term impact on clients and the community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

Project Reset Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Apprenticeship Employment	2	2	1	5
Core Foundations Workshop	137	0	18	155
Financial Wellness Workshop	40	4	5	49
Job Coaching and Development	66	29	44	139
Orientation Workshop	156	0	0	156
Pre-Apprenticeship Employment	1	2	3	6
Resume and Interview Workshop	83	18	18	119
Trade Based Employment	20	9	12	41
Trade Preparation Workshop	41	8	5	54
Transitional Employment	65	7	15	87
Total	611	79	121	811

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
• Most participants will secure transitional employment within 60 days of starting the program	✔ 53% secured transitional employment within 60 days of starting the program in year one of grant cycle four
• Most participants will move from transitional employment to trade employment within a year of starting the program	○ 45% moved from transitional to trade employment after starting the program
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

RECONNECT MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS

ReConnect, Inc. provides participants tools needed to transform their lives and the communities in which they live. Programs focus on re-entry support and services like job readiness, life skills, educational tutoring, and family mediation. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 8, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, ReConnect administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. ReConnect identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

ReConnect Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Career Prep	8	0	0	8
Construction Tool Box Credentials	3	0	0	3
Final Number	1	0	0	1
Final Number 2.0- Independent Learning	51	3	0	54
GPS (self-paced)	115	0	0	115
KEYS 1	153	2	15	170
KEYS 2	95	0	2	97
Other Services	3	0	0	3
Post-Release Reentry Support	35	0	1	36
Pre-Release Reentry Support	98	0	1	99
Ready for Work	1	0	0	1
Right Start 2.0	111	0	0	111
Success Prep	31	0	0	31
Total	705	5	19	729

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
○ o Most participants will be employed upon program completion	✔ 78% obtained employment in year one and 62% obtained employment in year two
○ o Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

RISE MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS ::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::

RISE assists individuals within the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services in wellness and recovery by providing job readiness, reentry planning, and connections to housing and employment pathways. RISE uses peer facilitators (previous RISE graduates) to facilitate then in-prison programming. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a virtual meeting on September 3, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, RISE administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. RISE identified expected accomplishments in the upcoming grant cycle and their expected long-term impact on clients and the community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

RISE Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
RISE: Post-Release Reentry Support	34	20	28	82
RISE: Pre-Release Reentry Support	31	60	33	124
Total	65	80	61	206

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
• Most (85%) participants will have secured housing prior to release	✔ 100% of participants have secured housing prior to release
• Most (80%) participants will have gained employment upon release	✔ 91% of participants secured employment in year one and 79% did in year two
• Most (70%) participants will have maintained employment for three quarters of the year	○ 65% of participants-maintained employment for three quarters post-release
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

YORK UNIVERSITY MEASURE RESULTS AND OFFERINGS :::::::::::

The mission of York University is to transform lives through Christ-centered education and to equip students for lifelong service to God, family, and society. The overarching goal of York University is to educate program participants to prepare them for gainful employment to which they are well-suited upon their release from NCCW, thus increasing their chances for successful reintegration into their communities. To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were updated during a virtual meeting on September 8, 2020, and included NCJR researchers, York College administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. York identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Outcome measures and program offerings for the second year of Grant Cycle Four are presented below.

York University Program Offerings	Completed	In Progress	Incomplete	Total
Associate Degree	0	11	0	11
Total	0	11	0	11

Goals

Results

Goals	Results
○ Most (80%) participants will report confidence in their abilities upon completion	✔ 100% of participants report confidence in their abilities nearing program completion
○ Most (90%) of participants are making progress towards earing an A.A. degree	✔ 100% of participants are still progressing towards their degree
○ Most participants will want to improve social justice in the community upon completion	✔ 78% of participants report wanting to improve social justice in the community nearing completion
○ At least half of participants will be employed upon release of NDCS	✔ 100% of released participants are employed
○ Aggregate VLS decrease 3-year recidivism rate will be below state average	✔ Aggregated recidivism results are reported on pages 18-22

CONCLUDING REMARKS ::

This report highlights several findings from an ongoing evaluation of the VLS program initiative but is not comprehensive of all program successes. The NCJR-UNO evaluation team has provided technical assistance along with formative, process, and summative evaluation services as part of the overall evaluation. While monthly and quarterly reports focus on data monitoring updates, the present annual report focuses more on outcomes examined per summative evaluation efforts. Recent VLS evaluation reports using additional data not presented here can be obtained on our website.

There are several notable observations that should be made in reviewing this report. First and foremost, several results and measures presented provide supportive evidence that the VLS initiative is achieving the overarching long-term program goals of increasing the quality of life and meaningful employment among participants, while aiding in the desistance-recidivism process. Attitude and behavior assessment scores show improvements for select grantee programs; a measure that has been extended to all grantees using a new survey developed by the evaluation team that has been rolled out this fiscal year. Data also continue to show that VLS participants are more likely to find employment post-incarceration and earn more income when employed. Recidivism results revealed the strength of in-facility programming and identified impactful programming types.

While VLS participation has increased since last year while covid limited program and participant capacity, participation has not completely rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Some of this increase in program participation may be attributed to the considerable hiring gains within NDCS that has enabled more staff to make program referrals to potential VLS participants and provide oversight for safe program facilitation. Additionally, observers may note that days till successful completion has increased as the needs of the population have increased with inflation and mental health needs.

The evaluation team has been working with NDCS to transfer VLS program data into NICaMS from a third-party management system. The transition to this state-managed database has three primary goals relevant to the evaluation: 1) NDCS staff will have real time access to VLS data, 2) program providers will be able to see a participant's needs, allowing systematic matching of needs to interventions across grantees, and 3) program providers will be able to see other program offerings the participant has taken and customize a case plan with appropriate referrals to other VLS providers.

The evaluation team is also working with NDCS to increase the utilization of quality evidence-based interventions. The range of programming (over 100 unique programs) has limited the evaluation to examining mostly intermediate-term outcomes. However, the literature points to an advantage of having multiple programs offerings because the diverse justice-involved population has many different needs, challenges, and barriers to successful reentry.

Finally, the evaluation team continues to work with NDCS to improve evaluation procedures by adopting standardized evaluation procedures outlined in LB 896. Moving forward, the evaluators will place more emphasis a cost-benefit analysis that will show a return on investment that will be informed by the following formative evaluation data: site visits, key staff interviews, interviews with offenders, group observations, and a review of materials for applicable programs. The extent to which the data show adherence to concepts linked with program effectiveness will be reported, along with feedback to the department including the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement.

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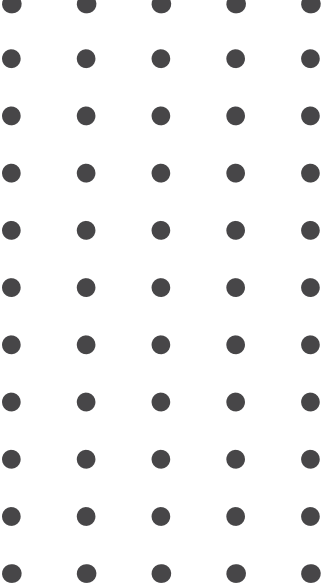
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