

Why GAO Did This Study

About 700,000 inmates are released from federal and state custody each year, and another 9 million are booked into and released from local jails. Former inmates face challenges as they transition into, or reenter, society, such as finding housing and employment. According to the most recent data available, more than two-thirds of state prisoners are rearrested for a new offense within 3 years of release, and about half are reincarcerated. Federal reentry grants are available for state and local providers, as successful reentry reduces rearrest or reincarceration, known as recidivism. GAO was asked to review (1) the extent to which there is fragmentation, overlap, and duplication across federal reentry grant programs; (2) the coordination efforts federal grant-making agencies have taken to prevent unnecessary duplication and share promising practices; and (3) the extent to which federal grant-making agencies measure grantees' effectiveness in reducing recidivism. GAO identified and analyzed the grant programs and agencies that supported reentry efforts in fiscal year 2011; analyzed agency documents, such as grant solicitations; and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ, Labor, and HHS enhance their information sharing on approaches for determining how effectively grantees reduce recidivism. In response, DOJ, Labor, and HHS reported that they would take actions to address our recommendation.

INMATE REENTRY PROGRAMS

Enhanced Information Sharing Could Further Strengthen Coordination and Grant Management

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2011, the Departments of Justice (DOJ), Labor (Labor), and Health and Human Services (HHS) separately administered nine fragmented but minimally overlapping reentry grant programs with low risk of duplication. Specifically, GAO found that these grant programs are fragmented since more than one federal agency is involved in administering the programs. Further, GAO found that overlap across the nine programs was minimal because the programs varied in (1) their applicant eligibility criteria, (2) the extent to which their funds solely benefit the reentry population, and (3) their primary services funded. For example, Labor's reentry program limits eligibility to private, nonprofit organizations that will use the funds primarily to assist current or former inmates—residing in or released from any facility—with their employment needs. In contrast, one of DOJ's reentry programs limits eligibility to governmental entities that will use the funds primarily to assist current or former inmates—residing in or released from state, local, or tribal facilities—with their substance abuse treatment needs. Given the variance across eligible applicants, beneficiaries, and primary services, the overlap across the nine programs is minimal and the risk of duplication—when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities, provide the same services to the same beneficiaries, or provide funding for the same purpose—is low.

DOJ, Labor, and HHS have acknowledged where some overlap exists and therefore have taken steps to coordinate their reentry efforts to further prevent unnecessary duplication and share promising practices. For example, in 2011, the U.S. Attorney General convened the Federal Interagency Reentry Council—a group of federal agencies whose mission is to make communities safer; assist those returning from prison and jail in becoming productive, taxpaying citizens; and save taxpayer dollars by lowering the direct and collateral costs of incarceration. Further, agency officials from all three agencies reported that they share grant solicitations with one another before issuing them, and in 2009, DOJ and HHS established a memorandum of agreement to formally coordinate funding activities related to reentry. In addition, all three agencies have taken action, or have actions under way, to require their grant applicants to report other federal funds they are receiving, or plan to receive, and consider this information before they will make new award decisions.

DOJ, Labor, and HHS are measuring grantee performance and conducting program evaluations, but they could enhance information sharing about the methods they use to collect and analyze data to determine how effectively grantees reduce recidivism. To monitor grantee performance, DOJ, Labor, and HHS collect different performance information, such as rearrest, reincarceration, and employment rates, through several web-based grant management systems, each with varying strengths and limitations. However, the agencies have not formally discussed these systems with one another, or how they analyze the data they collect, despite engaging in collaborations during which such discussions would be practical and useful. Consistent with effective interagency coordination practices, sharing information like this could help the agencies better leverage existing practices and improve their approaches to determining and reporting on grantee effectiveness.