

# **From Prisons to Jobs: Improving Vocational Training in Prison and Opening Employment Pathways for Formerly Incarcerated New Yorkers**

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JANUARY  
2026

# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Vocational training in New York State prisons.....	3
Overview of this study.....	3
<b>Methodology and Limitations.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key Findings.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Participant experience with in-prison programming.....	5
Perceived limitations with current in-prison vocational training programs.....	5
First employment after release.....	6
<b>Recommendations.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Acknowledgments.....	17
About Citations.....	17
Credits.....	17
Suggested Citation.....	17
Notes.....	17

# Introduction

Securing stable employment is a critical factor in reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated people.<sup>1</sup> Every year, around 10,000 people are released from prison in New York, entering a labor market filled with barriers, restrictions, and stigma for those with conviction histories.<sup>2</sup> Overcoming these challenges to secure a job is not easy, and it requires access to resources that help people build market-relevant skills. Without these, formerly incarcerated New Yorkers may struggle to find employment and reintegrate into society.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing this fact, New York State offers a variety of programs to help incarcerated people prepare for employment after release. For example, according to the State University of New York (SUNY), more than 30 Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) facilities have college-in-prison programs.<sup>4</sup> And, for people incarcerated in New York State prisons who do not already have a postsecondary degree, history of employment, or professional license, participation in a vocational training program is mandatory.<sup>5</sup> Although there is a substantial amount of research on the positive effects of college-in-prison programs, there is an overall lack of research focused on vocational training.<sup>6</sup> However, according to a national analysis of 34 studies, participation in in-prison vocational training reduces the likelihood of returning to prison by nearly one-third.<sup>7</sup>

## Vocational training in New York State prisons

DOCCS provides its Vocational Education Program with the aim of improving incarcerated people's "employment potential and ability to function in the community."<sup>8</sup> Across 41 facilities, the agency offers training in 27 trades and apprenticeships in 12 different trade areas.<sup>9</sup> Throughout 2023, 13,039 people incarcerated in New York State prisons participated in vocational education.<sup>10</sup>

In 2022, recognizing the ongoing employment challenges people with conviction histories face, Governor Kathy Hochul launched the "Jails to Jobs" initiative, which aimed to connect formerly incarcerated New Yorkers with resources and education to improve reentry success.<sup>11</sup> And since Commissioner Daniel Martuscello's appointment in 2023, he and his leadership team have taken steps to improve vocational training and employment pathways by expanding access to digital literacy training, introducing new apprenticeship programs, and upgrading equipment. In December 2024, DOCCS revised its Vocational Education Directive No. 4806 to include updated compliance standards and expanded support for young and disabled people in custody.<sup>12</sup>

## Overview of this study

Inspired by these efforts, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted research to explore access to in-prison vocational programming and post-release employment pathways in New York State. Vera surveyed 104 people who were released from DOCCS facilities between January 2021 and October 2024 about their experiences with vocational training while incarcerated and initial employment experiences after release. The findings suggest that making training curricula more relevant to job market opportunities, increasing job placement support, and finding more opportunities to earn externally recognized certifications may improve employment outcomes for people who participate in vocational training while incarcerated.

Vera also recommends that DOCCS expand accredited vocational programs and enhance partnerships with workforce development agencies, employers, and community-based organizations (CBOs). DOCCS should focus on creating more accredited programs in collaboration with state agencies and workforce development providers to better prepare people for New York's labor market upon release.

Although other barriers to employment exist—discrimination chief among them—the benefits of improving vocational training are clear. By boosting employment, reducing recidivism, and facilitating reintegration into society, improving in-prison training and investing in post-release job placement has the potential to improve safety for all New Yorkers.

## Methodology and Limitations

Vera constructed a survey that asked people about their in-prison vocational training and post-release employment experiences.<sup>13</sup> From July to October 2024, on Vera's behalf, reentry providers and community organizers circulated the survey to their program participants and people on their email lists, included it in their newsletters, and shared a flyer promoting the survey in their physical offices.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Vera staff recruited participants through personal networks and by setting up an informational stand at the Fortune Society over two days in August 2024, where people were given the opportunity to complete the survey in person.<sup>15</sup>

Vera developed the survey after a review of the literature revealed gaps in the research regarding post-release employment outcomes in New York State. The survey consisted primarily of multiple-choice questions with some optional open-ended opportunities to elaborate. The survey included questions about vocational training while incarcerated and employment after release.<sup>16</sup>

Over a four-month period, a total of 104 formerly incarcerated people completed the survey.<sup>17</sup> The majority of respondents self-identified as Black (53 percent) or Hispanic or Latino (30 percent), with only 3 percent identifying as white (Table 1, see the Appendix for all tables).<sup>18</sup> In comparison, as of October 2024, the DOCCS population was 49 percent Black, 24 percent Hispanic, and 23 percent white, with the remaining 4 percent made up of Native American, Asian, or other.<sup>19</sup> A plurality of respondents (42 percent) had been incarcerated for between one and five years (Table 2), and roughly one-third of respondents were between ages 51 and 64 (Table 3).<sup>20</sup> Eighty-four percent of the sample were men, 15 percent were women, and 1 percent was gender nonconforming/nonbinary (Table 4). Respondents in the sample served at least part of their sentences at 29 correctional facilities in total; 86 percent of the sample were incarcerated at some point in facilities that are still operational, while 14 percent were incarcerated in facilities that have since closed.

Readers should keep in mind several limitations to the study. Given the small sample size and the sampling strategy, the study sample is not representative of the entire population of people released from New York State prisons from 2021 to 2024 and may not accurately reflect the broader population's experiences. In particular, people in the survey sample skewed older than the full population of people released from prison: one-third of survey respondents were over 50 years old compared to roughly one-fifth of people released from prison in 2020 (Table 3).<sup>21</sup> In addition, the survey sampled people returning home at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of severe staffing and program shortages in DOCCS facilities. DOCCS has actively introduced new programs since the new leadership in 2023 to meet emerging and high demand sectors.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, program participation before 2023 does not reflect the recent improvements being made.

Despite this, Vera's findings provide valuable insight into the experiences of formerly incarcerated people recently released in New York. The survey results also suggest areas for further research.

## Key Findings

### Participant experience with in-prison programming

A majority of survey respondents reported being able to access at least one vocational training program and said they felt at least "somewhat proficient" in the trade area after completion. Specifically, 79 percent (n=82) of all 104 respondents reported enrolling in at least one vocational training program while incarcerated.<sup>23</sup> People who completed their training reported similar results: of the 70 respondents who completed their training, nearly three quarters—51 people—noted that they felt either somewhat or extremely proficient in the trade area that they studied. Twelve of those who completed vocational training felt that they were either somewhat or extremely inexperienced after their training, and seven people felt neither proficient nor experienced after completion (Table 5).

### Perceived limitations with current in-prison vocational training programs

#### Operational barriers to access

Despite DOCCS requiring access to vocational training for people in their custody, a substantial portion of survey respondents (42 percent) reported facing operational barriers to accessing this programming. These included long waiting lists due to limited program availability (15 people); impediments created by corrections officers (six people); and restrictions resultant from disciplinary records or housing unit location, including solitary confinement (six people) (Table 6).

#### Issues with availability of external-certification programs

Externally recognized credentials such as those issued by the Department of Labor (DOL) can help people demonstrate employability after release, making it easier to find a job.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, a study involving formerly incarcerated job seekers found that while prison-issued certificates may be helpful in the labor market, they also complicate the job search by informing employers of job seekers' time in prison.<sup>25</sup> The majority of Vera's survey respondents, however, received only DOCCS certificates at the end of their vocational training programs. Of the 70 people in Vera's sample who completed vocational training, 47 respondents received a DOCCS certificate, four received either a DOL or industry-standard certificate, and two received both a DOCCS and external certificate. Seventeen respondents did not receive any certification upon completion (Table 7). The 2024 DOL Workforce Performance Report echoes these findings: only 12 percent of incarcerated people who participated in programming from 2022 to mid-2024 obtained third-party certifications, compared to more than 80 percent who received "vocational job titles" or DOCCS certifications.<sup>26</sup>

#### Market relevance of available programs and perceived barriers to employment

Of the 70 respondents who completed their vocational programs, more than half (n=39) found employment after release. However, of the 39 respondents who completed vocational training and found employment, 23 (59 percent) indicated that they did not use the skills or credentials obtained during their vocational training in their employment, and only 11 people (28 percent) reported finding jobs in fields corresponding to their vocational training.<sup>27</sup>

Of people who reported facing barriers to employment (n=67), discrimination due to a conviction record was the top perceived barrier (35 people) (Table 8). However, the other top answers related in some way to how prepared respondents were for the job market upon release: a lack of experience in the field (27 people) and not having the right degree, certificate, or credential (24 people). Other barriers identified by respondents pointed to questions over the content of their training, with respondents noting a lack of enough modern/digital skills (16 people) and insufficient education or training (15 people).<sup>28</sup>

Of course, vocational training cannot solve every issue for job seekers with conviction histories, especially issues related to discrimination and bias, but high-quality training that correlates to available job opportunities can nevertheless help improve employment outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

## **First employment after release**

Securing employment within the first year after release proved challenging for many respondents. Age discrimination may be at least partially responsible; 60 percent of survey respondents were ages 41 or older, and criminal records aside, the AARP reports that a majority of people ages 40 to 65 have seen or experienced age-related workplace discrimination.<sup>30</sup> Even so, of the people in Vera's sample who were released before 2024 (Vera excluded people released in 2024, who may not have had adequate time to start their job search) and who were looking for employment, 41 out of 68 respondents (60 percent) found employment within one year of release (Table 9).<sup>31</sup> Among those who found employment (n=45), only half (n=23) indicated that their income covered basic household expenses. Although formerly incarcerated people are not the only ones who struggle to find jobs that pay living wages, the importance of covering basic household expenses may be greater for formerly incarcerated New Yorkers: research shows that 42 percent of those released from DOCCS facilities to New York City end up in shelters, and the lack of stable housing can increase rates of recidivism.<sup>32</sup>

Vera's survey results align with national research showing that the jobs available to formerly incarcerated people often lack sufficient wages.<sup>33</sup> Overall, at the time of survey completion, half (n=42) of all survey respondents who were able and wanting to work were unemployed, suggesting the immense challenge of finding employment after release (Table 10).<sup>34</sup> Of respondents who were released before 2024 and found employment post-release, almost all (40 out of 45) reported having consistent working hours at their first job, but other measures of the quality of employment varied substantially.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, more than half (26 out of 45) of those who found employment indicated that their hourly wage at their first job was \$19 an hour or less (Table 11), and 17 out of the 26 respondents with this hourly wage range indicated that their income did not cover their basic household expenses.

Union-affiliated jobs provide opportunities for economic mobility, job security, strong workplace protections, and career advancement. However, formerly incarcerated people often face barriers to these jobs, such as a lack of transferable experience, certifications, and documentation.<sup>36</sup> In Vera's sample, eight of those who found employment noted that they had a union membership in their first job after release (Table 12).<sup>37</sup> Strengthening union connections during vocational training could expand access not just to employment generally, but specifically to well-paying union jobs with good job security.

# Recommendations

Vera's findings suggest the need for DOCCS to enhance its vocational training programs to provide clear pathways to stable employment for people returning home. Although recent changes under Commissioner Martuscello's leadership and the recent expansion of Tuition Assistance Program funds to incarcerated students represent a promising shift in priorities, practical implementation remains critical.<sup>38</sup> Further, programs must not only exist but also be accessible to all, supported by adequate staffing, and—to the extent possible given resource constraints and the unexpected disruptions common in prisons—free from barriers that hinder participation.

The following recommendations incorporate findings from Vera's survey alongside Vera's broader research on best practices for prison education and vocational training. The recommendations aim to build on DOCCS's recent initiatives and offer strategies to measure and enhance their effectiveness.<sup>39</sup>

## **1. Expand and update accredited vocational training and apprenticeship programs.**

- a. **Reduce operational barriers to existing vocational programming.** Because many facilities have staffing challenges, DOCCS should work with the Public Employees Federation, the union representing DOCCS's vocational program staff, to find solutions that will allow it to expand access to vocational programs throughout its facilities. Solutions can include partnerships with labor unions and SUNY to supply local instructors who can offer statewide accredited courses.
- b. **Expand access to accredited programming.** DOCCS should expand work with SUNY and other college programs to help people who participate in vocational programs receive transferable credit that enables them to continue their education after release. Additionally, access to SUNY instructors could expand the availability of programs in remote facilities near SUNY campuses, which might otherwise struggle to recruit instructors.
- c. **Expand access to programming aligned with labor market needs.** DOCCS should work with the DOL to help vocational programs prioritize building skills helpful for formerly incarcerated people to find jobs that pay a living wage. A recent report by Vera, *The Labor Market for People with Conviction Histories: An Examination of Access to Good Jobs*, identified well-paying jobs in growth industries that are accessible to formerly incarcerated New Yorkers with different educational backgrounds.<sup>40</sup> Other than electrical vocational training, DOCCS's current offerings do not align with the jobs mentioned in that report.<sup>41</sup>

## **2. Work with partners to provide structured job readiness and mentoring services.**

- a. **Strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) and employers.** DOCCS should develop new relationships and build on existing partnerships with reentry- and employment-focused CBOs and employers to provide more job-readiness training, job fairs, and mentorship programs to incarcerated people that can continue after they return home.<sup>42</sup> In addition, DOCCS can invite employers facing labor shortages to tour facilities, learn about accredited vocational programs, and host virtual interviews before release. Only six respondents to Vera's survey reported receiving job placement assistance from DOCCS while incarcerated. The lack of structured support for job placement highlights an opportunity for

partnerships with workforce development agencies to better connect people with employment opportunities.

- b. **Create new pre-apprenticeship programs.** Many unions offer apprenticeship programs, but it is likely logistically challenging to enroll incarcerated people into these programs. DOCCS should expand existing relationships with unions and employers to build out union pre-apprenticeship programs that will improve pathways to union membership and employment, enabling people to begin relevant training and coursework while incarcerated that they can continue post-release.
  - i. Although Vera's survey did not specifically ask about apprenticeship participation, apprenticeship programs provide a critical pathway to stable employment—yet access remains extremely limited for incarcerated people in New York prisons. According to the New York State Department of Labor's 2024 workforce performance report, which provides information about vocational education and workforce development programs across a variety of state agencies, only 25 incarcerated people completed DOCCS apprenticeship programs from 2022 to mid-2024.<sup>43</sup> Apprenticeships behind bars can significantly improve employment outcomes, reduce recidivism, and increase post-release wages, but are often underused due to limited program availability, a lack of employer partnerships, and restrictive eligibility criteria.<sup>44</sup>
- c. **Offer more accredited vocational programs.** CBOs—such as the Center for Employment Opportunities and Pathways To Apprenticeship—can help facilitate accredited vocational programs and job-readiness training while working with unions to build out prison pre-apprenticeship programs.<sup>45</sup>

3. **Develop data infrastructure so that DOCCS and its partners can track, analyze, and share outcomes of vocational training and employment programs, as well as long-term effectiveness measures such as post-release employment rates.**

- a. **Evaluate in-prison program access and success.** Greater data availability will help DOCCS measure access to and the success of vocational training by tracking program-level participation rates, certificates received, and apprenticeship programs completed.
- b. **Track longitudinal employment outcomes after release.** DOCCS can collaborate with workforce development programs, CBOs that support post-release employment, employers who participated in pre-apprenticeship programs, and other stakeholders to gather and analyze data to track the outcomes of vocational training programs. By tracking and publishing post-release employment data such as employment rates, wages, and retention, which are already collected for people on parole, DOCCS and external stakeholders can ensure program efficacy and implement evidence-based improvements.

4. **Conduct further research into the delivery and impact of vocational training in DOCCS facilities.**

- a. Vera's findings point to the need for additional research, which should be conducted by an independent party, such as a local university. To begin, a survey that utilizes a representative sample would be essential to better examine the relationship between in-prison vocational training and post-release employment. Future research should

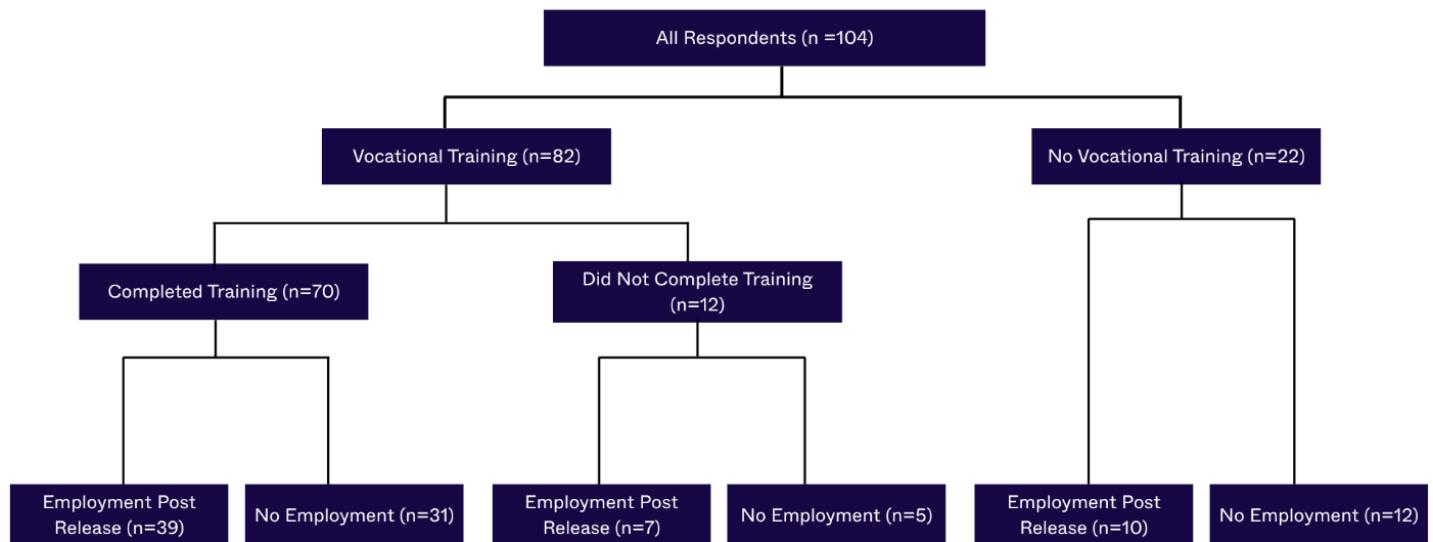
also examine how participation in vocational training affects people's long-term employment outcomes, including job stability and wage growth after release. Vocational training programs may allow people to gain skills beyond their formal training area and further research should explore how these competencies translate to employment post release.<sup>46</sup> In addition, interviews with formerly incarcerated people, employers, and workforce development agencies would help identify which programs are most effective in supporting employment post-release and how to expand access to stable jobs.

Improving vocational training in New York's prisons will not solve every employment issue formerly incarcerated New Yorkers face. Even so, improving the quality of vocational training and providing greater job placement assistance to people upon release is an important step in supporting New Yorkers returning home.

# Appendix: Demographics and Select Survey Responses

**Figure 1**

Flow chart of study sample



## Demographics of Survey Respondents (Total 104 respondents)

Table 1

### Race/ethnicity

Race/ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	2.9
Asian/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2	1.9
Black or African American	55	52.9
Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino*	31	29.8
Middle Eastern or North African	1	1.0
Multiracial	7	6.7
Other (Please specify)	2	1.9
White	3	2.9
Total	104	100.0

Note: 83 percent of respondents identified as Black or African American (52.9 percent) or Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino (29.8 percent). As a result, the sample overrepresents Hispanic and underrepresents non-Hispanic white in the DOCCS population. In October 2024, the DOCCS population was 22.8 percent white, 49.3 percent Black, 23.7 percent Hispanic, 0.9 percent Native American, 0.8 percent Asian, and 2.4 percent other. Source: New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Undercustody October 1, 2024 NYS-DOCCS* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, October 1, 2024),

[https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/10/2024\\_10\\_01-uc-profile.pdf](https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/10/2024_10_01-uc-profile.pdf).

\*This category includes three people who identified as both Black or African American and Hispanic and four people who identified as both white and Hispanic.

Table 2

### Length of incarceration

Length of incarceration	Frequency	Percentage
1 year to 5 years	44	42.3
6 years to 10 years	18	17.3
11 years to 15 years	11	10.6
16 years to 20 years	7	6.7
21 years to 25 years	7	6.7
26 years to 30 years	10	9.6
31 years or more	7	6.7
Total	104	99.9*

\*Percentage total adds to less than 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 3****Age**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
19-24	2	1.9
25-30	16	15.4
31-40	24	23.1
41-50	25	24.0
51-64	34	32.7
65+	3	2.9
Total	104	100.0

**Table 4****Gender**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Gender nonconforming/Nonbinary	1	1.0
Man	87	83.7
Transgender woman	1	1.0
Woman	15	14.4
Total	104	100.1*

\*Percentage total adds to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

## Breakdown of responses to select survey questions

**Table 5**

### Proficiency of skills in trade area studied

(Sample = 70 respondents who completed the DOCCS vocational requirement)

Q24. Did you master entry level skills or become proficient in the trade area you studied?	Frequency	Percentage
After training:		
I was extremely proficient.	30	42.9
I was somewhat proficient.	21	30
I was neither proficient nor inexperienced.	7	10
I was somewhat inexperienced.	6	8.6
I was extremely inexperienced.	6	8.6
Total	70	100.1*

\*Percentage total adds to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 6**

### Barriers faced while accessing vocational training programs

(Sample = 44 respondents who faced barriers to vocational training programs)

Q16. Please elaborate on the barriers you faced when trying to access vocational training programs.	Frequency	Percentage
Long waitlists or no space in programs.	15	34.1
Felt that the correction officers prevented them from accessing vocational training.	6	13.6
Were not eligible for vocational training because of their disciplinary records or were being held in solitary.	6	13.6
The facility didn't offer vocational training, had limited programming because of lack staffing and/or supplies, or felt that the training materials were inadequate.	5	11.4
Already satisfied their vocational requirement prior to prison or were not allowed to take more than one.	5	11.4
Was not eligible for vocational training because of their sentence.	3	6.8
Was forced to do a work assignment full time and not allowed to do vocational training.	3	6.8
Moved facilities before completing their vocational training and was not allowed to start a new one.	1	2.3
Total*	44	100

\*The question was open-ended and respondents could identify more than one barrier. Responses were recategorized by researchers.

**Table 7****Source of license or certification received upon completion of program**

(Sample = 70 respondents who completed the DOCCS vocational requirement)

Q25. Which of the following best describes the source of the license or certificate you received upon completing the program? Select all that apply.	Frequency	Percentage
DOCCS	47	67.1
DOL	2	2.9
Industry	2	2.9
Industry and DOL	1	1.4
Industry and DOL and DOCCS	1	1.4
Did not receive a license or certificate.	17	24.3
Total	70	100

**Table 8****Barriers to finding first employment**

(Sample = 67 people who note that they faced barriers to finding employment)

Q37. What barriers to employment did/do you face in finding your first employment? Please select all that apply.	Frequency	Percentage
I face discrimination due to my criminal record	35	52.2
I don't have enough experience in the field	27	40.3
I don't have the right degree, certificate or credential	24	35.8
I don't have enough modern / digital skills	16	23.9
I have insufficient education or training	15	22.4
I don't have a driver's license	11	16.4
I don't have a large professional network	9	13.4
I don't have access to reliable transportation	9	13.4
I face discrimination due to my age	6	9.0
I have a disability	6	9.0
Total*	158	

\*Respondents could identify more than one barrier. Due to this, percentages add to more than 100 percent.

**Table 9****Length of time to find employment upon release**

(Sample = 104 respondents)

Q27. How long did it take you to find employment upon release?	Frequency	Percentage
Released before 2024		
Did not find employment upon release	23	33.8
More than 12 months upon release	4	5.9
Within 12 months of release	41	60.3
Total	68	100

**Table 10****Current employment status**

(Sample = 84, all respondents who were intentionally seeking employment)

Q61. What best describes your <u>current</u> employment status?	Frequency	Percentage
Employed	42	50.0
Unemployed	42	50.0
Total*	84	100.0

\*Excludes 20 people who were not looking for work or who were unable to work.

**Table 11****Hourly wages**

(Sample = 45 respondents who were released prior to 2024 and found employment post-release)

Q32. How much were you paid hourly? (excluding those released in 2024)	Frequency	Percentage
Less than \$15	6	13.3
\$15–19	20	44.4
\$20–24	6	13.3
\$25–29	6	13.3
\$30+	6	13.3
I am not paid hourly.	1	2.2
Total	45	99.8*

\*Percentage total adds to less than 100 percent due to rounding.

**Table 12****Union Membership**

(Sample = 56 respondents who found employment regardless of participation in training)

Q34. Were you a member of a union?	Frequency	Percentage
I am not sure	6	10.7
No there is a union but I am/was not a member	14	25
No there is/was no union	28	50
Yes	8	14.3
Total	56	100

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Daniel F. Martuscello, commissioner of the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, and the deputy commissioners, for generously giving their time to provide feedback on this report. They wish to thank Micaela Linder from the Fortune Society for assisting with participant recruitment. The authors would also like to thank Cindy Reed for developmental editing of the report, Léon Digard and Lisha Nadkarni for editing the report, and James Cui for editorial support.

## About citations

As researchers and readers alike rely more and more on public knowledge made available through the Internet, “link rot” has become a widely acknowledged problem with creating useful and sustainable citations. To address this issue, the Vera Institute of Justice is using Perma.cc (<https://perma.cc/>), a service that helps scholars, journals, and courts create permanent links to the online sources cited in their work.

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## Suggested citation

Chantal Polinsky, Christopher Gernon, Jason Rodriguez, Sehej Singh, Benjamin Heller, and Jaeok Kim, *From Prisons to Jobs: Improving Vocational Training in Prison and Opening Employment Pathways for Formerly Incarcerated New Yorkers* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2026).

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<sup>3</sup> Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, "Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People," Prison Policy Initiative, July 2018, <https://perma.cc/FVS3-LYM5>; and William G. Saylor and Gerald G. Gaes, "The Post-Release Employment Project: Prison Work Has Measurable Effects on Post-Release Success," *Federal Prisons Journal* 2, no. 4 (1992), 33–36, <https://perma.cc/MUY3-2PLY>.

<sup>4</sup> State University of New York (SUNY), "SUNY HEP Dashboards," <https://www.suny.edu/impact/education/hep/suny-hep-dashboards>.

<sup>5</sup> According to DOCCS Vocational Education Directive No. 4806, "any incarcerated individual who does not have verifiable training in a trade or employment history, is required to participate in a Vocational Education Program." New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Vocational Education Directive No. 4086* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2024), 1,

[https://web.archive.org/web/20250331184858/https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/4806\\_1.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20250331184858/https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/4806_1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Niloufer Taber, Lina Cool, Chris Mai, and Jennifer Hill, *The Impacts of College In-Prison Participation on Safety and Employment in New York State: An Analysis of College Students Funded by the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), 35, <https://vera-institute.files.svcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/Impacts-of-College-in-Prison-in-NYS-Report.pdf>; and Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, et al., *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality and Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), 23–32, <https://vera-institute.files.svcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bozick, Jennifer Steele, Louis Davis, et al., "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14 (2018), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6>.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Labor, *Catalog of Funding: Workforce Performance Report, 2024* (Albany, NY: Department of Labor, 2024), 4, <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/2024-cof-performance-report-final-112924.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Labor, *Catalog of Funding: Workforce Performance Report, 2024*, 2024, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Labor, *Catalog of Funding: Workforce Performance Report, 2024*, 2024, 4.

<sup>11</sup> New York State Governor Kathy Hochul, "Governor Hochul Announces 'Jails to Jobs'—A New Initiative to Improve Re-Entry into the Workforce and Reduce Recidivism," press release (Albany, NY: Office of the Governor, January 5, 2022), <https://perma.cc/LE96-Y587>.

<sup>12</sup> New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Vocational Education Directive No. 4086* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2024), 2, 5, 9–10, [https://web.archive.org/web/20250331184858/https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/4806\\_1.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20250331184858/https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/4806_1.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Four formerly incarcerated people recruited by Vera staff through their network reviewed and completed the initial survey. From the pilot test, Vera staff identified items that had either invalid or missing responses and revised the wordings to reduce confusion in the survey items. Participants of the pilot test provided feedback on the content of the survey items, order of questions, and technical glitches in the Qualtrics survey. Vera finalized the survey based on feedback from participants of the pilot test.

<sup>14</sup> A special thank you to the Fortune Society (NYC), the Osborne Association (Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn), CASES (NYC), VOICE Buffalo, Center for Community Alternatives in Rochester, and others that posted flyers and shared an online link to Vera's survey with their communities.

<sup>15</sup> Participation was open to anyone who was formerly incarcerated in New York State prisons regardless of their in-prison vocational training experience. Some participants were offered \$10 compensation for time spent taking the survey.

<sup>16</sup> A copy of the full survey used for this study can be found online, Vera Institute of Justice, *Prisons to Jobs Survey* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025), <http://www.vera.org/publications/prisons-to-jobs>.

<sup>17</sup> The survey sample covers about 0.25 percent of 41,250 people who were released from DOCCS from 2021 to 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Includes three people who identified as Black or African American and Hispanic and four people who identified as white and Hispanic.

<sup>19</sup> New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Undercustody Report* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2024), 2, [https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/10/2024\\_10\\_01-uc-profile.pdf](https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/10/2024_10_01-uc-profile.pdf). DOCCS's Hispanic

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category includes people who identify as Spanish or Latino. See New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Inmate Information Data Definitions*, <https://perma.cc/6ZTM-PKKT>.

<sup>20</sup> One quarter of the prison population in 2021 was 50 years old or older, and approximately 18 percent of people released from prison in 2020 were 50 years old or older. This means that Vera's sample is older than the incarcerated population and people released from prison. For the number of people in custody in 2021, see New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *Under Custody Report: Profile of Under Custody Population As of January 1, 2021* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2021), 4, <https://docts.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2022/04/under-custody-report-for-2021.pdf>. For the number of people released in 2020, see New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *2019 and 2020 Releases from Custody: Three Year Post-Release Follow-Up* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2024), 24, [https://docts.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/07/2019-2020-releases\\_three-year-post-release-follow-up.pdf](https://docts.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/07/2019-2020-releases_three-year-post-release-follow-up.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision, *2019 and 2020 Releases from Custody*, 2024, 24.

<sup>22</sup> According to Commissioner Daniel F. Martuscello, in communication with Vera researchers, new programs in high-demand sectors are solar energy technology, Commercial Driver's License (CDL) preparation, automotive technology, and heavy equipment operation.

<sup>23</sup> Of the 22 respondents who did not participate in vocational training, 27 percent (n=6) noted that they satisfied the vocational training program requirement with documentation prior to incarceration. Other reasons why people did not participate included full-time employment with Corcraft or other jobs during incarceration, participation in transitional services, and medical exemption.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen MacDonald and Carl Nink, *Industry Recognized Certification: A Pathway to Reentry 1st Edition* (Centerville, UT: MTC Institute, 2010), 2–3, <https://perma.cc/W9AY-5UQT>; and Kayla James, *How Corrections Departments Are Preparing People for In-Demand Careers That Support America's Infrastructure* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), 12–15, <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/how-corrections-departments-are-preparing-people-for-in-demand-careers.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Sadé L. Lindsay, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: How Formerly Incarcerated Men Navigate the Labor Market with Prison Credentials," *Criminology* 60, no. 3 (2022), 455–479, 11, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1745-9125.12307>.

<sup>26</sup> New York State Department of Labor (DOL), *Catalogue of Funding: Workforce Performance Report 2024* (Albany, NY: DOL, 2024), 4, <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/2024-cof-performance-report-final-112924.pdf>. This percentage is based on the calculation of total number of third-party certifications earned from 2022 to 2024 divided by total number of participants served from 2022 to 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Soft skills such as work ethic, problem-solving abilities, and professional discipline that individuals obtain through vocational training could potentially be transferable and useful for succeeding in the workplace.

<sup>28</sup> Respondents were able to select more than one barrier.

<sup>29</sup> MacDonald and Nink, *Industry Recognized Certification: A Pathway to Reentry 1st Edition*, 2010, 2–3; and Steve Aos, Marna Miller, and Elizabeth Drake, *Evidence-Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not* (Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2006), 6, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304716132\\_Evidence-based\\_public\\_policy\\_options\\_to\\_reduce\\_future\\_prison\\_construction\\_criminal\\_justice\\_costs\\_and\\_crime\\_rates](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304716132_Evidence-based_public_policy_options_to_reduce_future_prison_construction_criminal_justice_costs_and_crime_rates).

<sup>30</sup> Janine Vanderburg, "Addressing Ageism and Rethinking Workforce Development," *National Civic Review* 111, no. 4 (2023), <https://perma.cc/CB4H-G3EA>.

<sup>31</sup> The employment rate of the sample is lower than the employment rate in a national representative sample survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Employment rate needs to be interpreted in the context that employment landscape might likely have been affected as New York's economy is recovering from the pandemic. For more details about the employment rate of formerly incarcerated people using a national representative sample in 2018, see Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, *Out of Prison and Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018), <https://perma.cc/U5HJ-JEME>.

<sup>32</sup> Leah A. Jacobs and Aaron Gottlieb, "The Effect of Housing Circumstances on Recidivism: Evidence from a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 47, no. 9 (2020), 10–11, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8496894/pdf/nihms-1743485.pdf>; National Low Income Housing Coalition, "Out of Reach," <https://nlihc.org/oor/about>; and Coalition for the Homeless, *State of the Homeless 2024: Rights Under Attack, Leadership in Retreat* (New York: Coalition for the Homeless, 2024), 24, <https://perma.cc/FK4K-VVE4>.

<sup>33</sup> E. Ann Carson, Danielle H. Sandler, Renuka Bhaskar, et al., *Employment of Persons Released from Federal Prison in 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021), 10, <https://perma.cc/QV46-WU5G>; Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, "Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among Formerly Incarcerated People," Prison Policy Initiative, July 2018, <https://perma.cc/U5HJ-JEME>; and Kelsie Chesnut, Ruth Delaney, Eurielle Kiki, and Niloufer Taber, *The*

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*Labor Market for People with Conviction Histories: An Examination of Access to Good Jobs* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025), <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-labor-market-for-people-with-conviction-histories>.

<sup>34</sup> This excludes the 20 participants who were unable to work or not looking for work at the time of survey completion.

<sup>35</sup> This data point excludes nine people who were released in 2024 and found employment.

<sup>36</sup> Alyssa Bradley and Riley Webster, “Union Pathways Paving the Way for New Yorkers’ Social and Economic Mobility,” Center for Employment Opportunities, February 15, 2024, <https://perma.cc/JH9P-E875>.

<sup>37</sup> This is slightly lower than the state average of union membership at 21 percent. See Ruth Milkman and Joseph van der Nald, *The State of the Unions 2024: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States* (New York: CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, 2024), 13, <https://perma.cc/3BHK-V5YE>.

<sup>38</sup> Jessica Neptune, “TAP: A Long Time Coming,” Bard Institute, April 7, 2022, <https://perma.cc/PJ8H-BTEZ>.

<sup>39</sup> See Kayla James, *How Corrections Departments Are Preparing People for In-Demand Careers That Support America’s Infrastructure* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), 12–15, <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/how-corrections-departments-are-preparing-people-for-in-demand-careers.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Chesnut, Delaney, Kiki, and Taber, *The Labor Market for People with Conviction Histories: An Examination of Access to Good Jobs*, 2025, 96–97.

<sup>41</sup> According to the recent report by Vera, *The Labor Market for People with Conviction Histories: An Examination of Access to Good Jobs*, the top five accessible good jobs for formerly incarcerated New Yorkers that only require a postsecondary nondegree award include wind turbine service technician; electrical and electronics repairer of commercial and industrial equipment; surgical technologist; court reporter and simultaneous captioner; and electrical and electronics installer and repairer of transportation equipment. Good jobs that require an associate degree include the following: physical therapist assistant, respiratory therapist, diagnostic medical sonographer, paralegal and legal assistant, and dental hygienist. Good jobs that require a bachelor’s degree include fundraiser, logistician, medical and health services manager, information security analyst, market research analyst, and marketing specialist. For a full list of DOCCS vocational training programs, see Q21 in Vera Institute of Justice, *Prisons to Jobs Survey* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025), 13, <http://www.vera.org/publications/prisons-to-jobs>. Vera obtained the list of programs from the DOCCS website (see <https://perma.cc/7NH9-32BH>), but the actual availability of programs is unknown.

At the time this report was published, as of January 2026, DOCCS has added new vocational training programs to meet current workforce demands including solar energy technology, Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) preparation, automotive technology, and heavy equipment operation.

<sup>42</sup> DOCCS already hosts reentry fairs for people in certain facilities who are nearing release. These fairs include potential employers and CBOs. See New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *DOCCS Today* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2023), 13, <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2023/12/doccs-today-winter-2023-no-transitions-pdf>; and New York State Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS), *DOCCS Today* (Albany, NY: DOCCS, 2024), 6, <https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/08/doccs-today-spring-2024-no-transitions-compressed.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> New York State Department of Labor (DOL), *Catalogue of Funding: Workforce Performance Report 2024* (Albany, NY: DOL, 2024), 4, <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/12/2024-cof-performance-report-final-112924.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Annie McGrew and Angela Hanks, *The Case for Paid Apprenticeships Behind Bars* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2017), 10, <https://perma.cc/QLR9-KOYE>; and Ian Hecker and Daniel Kuehn, *Apprenticeship and the Justice System: Adapting a Proven Training Model to Serve People in Prison* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019), 10, <https://perma.cc/BTL6-BUBQ>.

<sup>45</sup> See more at Center For Employment Opportunities, “Our Model,” <https://perma.cc/OUZ5-5TAC>; and Pathways To Apprenticeship, “Our Mission,” <https://perma.cc/M6LU-3EMR>.

<sup>46</sup> Felipe Barrera-Osorio, Adriana D. Kugler, and Mikko I. Silliman, “Hard and Soft Skills in Vocational Training: Experimental Evidence from Colombia,” *The World Bank Economic Review* 37, no. 3 (2023) 409–436, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhad007>.