



**Re:** Tennessee Office of Reentry

## **Executive Summary**

Previous involvement with the criminal justice system significantly increases the likelihood of future involvement. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 44% of individuals who left state prisons were arrested at least once in their first year after release.<sup>i</sup> Instances of recidivism create a revolving door of justice involved individuals (JII), which becomes costly for states. Additionally, JII tend to experience barriers when entering the job market after receiving intervention. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee established the Tennessee Office of Reentry (TOOR) in 2021 to address this issue in his state. Since June of 2021, TOOR has enrolled 9,523 JII and supported them along their reentry journey. Housed in the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOL), TOOR provides workforce preparedness training, resources, and networking opportunities to JII. This innovative program has successfully reduced recidivism in prisons and jails throughout the state. This memorandum provides information on how TOOR is operated and an evaluation of its early impact.

## **Research Methods**

The majority of the information that follows comes from documents provided by the Tennessee Office of Reentry. These documents were procured through CSG South's 2025 STAR Award application. Any information not directly provided was retrieved through a scan of publicly available Tennessee data or by reviewing recidivism data.

## **Findings**

### ***Relevant Funding and ROI***

The Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) has a total budget of approximately \$269 million, with \$89.7 million appropriated by the state. The current TOOR budget is funded through state appropriations of \$2.3 million.<sup>ii</sup> This means that TOOR accounts for less than 1 percent of DOLWD's total budget and approximately 2.6 percent of its state allocated funds.

Though housed in DOLWD, TOOR impacts the long-term expenditures of the Tennessee Department of Corrections (DOC). Reducing the recidivism rate through TOOR has the potential to reduce the portion of the DOC budget devoted to facility maintenance by lowering the number of people being housed in state-funded facilities. 76 percent of the DOC budget goes towards maintaining state-run prisons, jails, and the four privately owned prisons. DOC has a \$1.395 billion total budget, with the state appropriating approximately \$1.384 billion.

<sup>iii</sup>

Based on TOOR's return on investment documentation, TOOR achieved 228 percent of its enrollment goal.<sup>iv</sup> It also estimated that by March 31, 2025, 5,896 JII enrollees had been employed.<sup>v</sup> It should be noted that this



number is not entirely reflective of the program’s success because some enrollees are still serving their sentence and therefore cannot seek employment yet.

### ***Recidivism Rate***

There is a lag in reporting data on recidivism. Therefore, the most recent data available is from 2023. According to the Tennessee Department of Corrections’ 2024 Statistical Abstract Report, Tennessee’s statewide recidivism rate was 39.8 percent, with jails having a 44.3 percent rate and prisons having a 33.3 percent rate. Recidivism rates are the lowest in a decade and show signs of continuing to trend downward.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Incarceration Rate***

Tennessee's incarceration rates have been trending downward since 2017, but in the past few years, there has been an upward tick in incarceration rates. Currently, the estimated incarceration rate is 817 per 100,000 people (this includes prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile justice facilities).<sup>vii</sup> It is estimated that at the end of 2023, 24,400 people were imprisoned in Tennessee.<sup>viii</sup>

### ***Initial Program Evaluation***

The Tennessee Office of Reentry has shown great success thus far. Based on the data provided by the Tennessee Office of Reentry, it seems the program has exceeded the goals it set out to achieve. It has surpassed its enrollment goal and successfully reduced its recidivism rate. While the incarceration rate has risen in recent years, TOOR has maintained a steady decline in recidivism. Furthermore, the employment rate for participants is high, especially considering that some participants have yet to be released from incarceration. As TOOR continues its efforts, the Tennessee DOC will likely see a decrease in recidivism and related costs.

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<sup>i</sup> Martin, Eric, and Marie Garcia. 2022. “Reentry Research at NIJ: Providing Robust Evidence for High-Stakes Decision-Making.” National Institute of Justice. April 11, 2022. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/reentry-research-nij-providing-robust-evidence-high-stakes-decision-making>.

<sup>ii</sup> Review of The Budget: Fiscal Year 2025-2026. n.d. The State of Tennessee.

<sup>iii</sup> Review of The Budget: Fiscal Year 2025-2026. n.d. The State of Tennessee.

<sup>iv</sup> Review of TOOR Fiscal Year 2024 Return on Investment Estimate . n.d. Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

<sup>v</sup> Review of Tennessee Office of Reentry: Impact through Data . n.d. Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

<sup>vi</sup> CSG South STAR Award Application. N.d.

<sup>vii</sup> Initiative, Prison Policy. n.d. “Tennessee Profile.” [www.prisonpolicy.org](http://www.prisonpolicy.org). <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/TN.html>.

<sup>viii</sup> USAFacts. 2025. “How Many People Are in Prisons in Tennessee?” USAFacts. March 14, 2025. <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-many-people-are-in-prisons-in-the-us/state/tennessee/>.