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Evaluating a Step-Down Strategy to  
Transfer Adults in State Prisons to Local  
Correctional Systems**

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## **Moving Closer to Home Before Release: Evaluating a Step-Down Strategy to Transfer Adults in State Prisons to Local Correctional Systems**

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### **Research Partners and Other Collaborating Organizations**

Northeastern University (PI) and the University of Pennsylvania (co-PI) partnered with:

- MA Department of Correction (DOC)
- Hampden County Sheriff's Office (HCSO)
- Stefan LoBuglio, project consultant (Justice Innovations LLC)

### **Summary of the Project**

#### *Major goals and objectives*

The overarching goal was to conduct process, impact, and cost-effectiveness evaluations for the joint Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA DOC) and Hampden County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) step-down reentry program. The research team seeks to provide policy guidance to the MA DOC, HCSO, and other states seeking a local step-down reentry program model.

#### *Research questions*

1. Which components of the HCSO program are fully and faithfully implemented, and which aspects contain challenges for staff, participants, and residents? Which parts of HCSO's model are likely contributing to any detected causal effects?
2. Does the step-down reentry program improve reintegration preparedness and recidivism relative to the traditional reentry pathway (returning to the community directly from prison)?
3. Is the jail step-down program cost effective, relative to housing the same people in prison?

#### *Research design, methods, analytical and data analysis techniques*

Process evaluation: Conduct interviews with staff and collect historical documents to develop institutional knowledge and determine which components of the HCSO program are likely contributing to any detected effects.

Impact evaluation: The impact design involved a difference-in-differences approach, where Hampden County and Worcester County were the treatment and control groups, respectively. This type of design compares outcomes based on the intended treatment assignment—here, the

county of release, where Hampden provides the program and Worcester does not—and was based on a Second Chance Act (SCA) grant that the Hampden County Sheriff’s Office was awarded in 2010, which expanded reentry programming and program capacity starting in 2011. The SCA grant also enabled the HCSO to include people at higher security levels in the step-down program. In this analysis, we estimate the impact of being eligible for the step-down program on recidivism outcomes.

Cost evaluation: Collect detailed cost and programmatic information.

### *Results/findings*

For the process evaluation, we learned a tremendous amount about how this step-down program works, which we can then extrapolate to how step-down programs could work in different settings and contexts. This includes the advantages and challenges of having a step-down program from various perspectives (state staff, county staff, and participants). Relatedly, we learned about the costs involved in running a comprehensive program. The impact analysis suggests there may have been something interesting and advantageous happening in Hampden County during our study period. However, some of these changes appear to occur before the key intervention took place, which complicates our analysis and the validity of our interpretation. Hampden County had other reentry efforts ongoing throughout the study period, and it is possible we are identifying changes from those initiatives here.

In the report we provide a range of example step-down program implementation costs (from essential programming to a comprehensive set of recommended programs), but we refer practitioners and policymakers to an online tool to make flexible decisions when adopting a step-down program. Other counties in Massachusetts are increasingly adopting step-down reentry programming, and the key results are available in several formats for practitioners.

### *Expected applicability of the research*

We aim to provide novel resources to help policymakers in different jurisdictions understand how step-down programs work and whether it might be a useful strategy to adopt. This includes a detailed summary of advantages, costs, and implementation challenges.

## **Moving Closer to Home Before Release: Evaluating a Step-Down Strategy to Transfer Adults in State Prisons to Local Correctional Systems (Final Research Report)**

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### **Introduction**

The distance between state prisons and the communities to which incarcerated individuals will return has long been cited as a significant challenge in the delivery and effectiveness of reentry services. Research studies using administrative data, including one consisting of a random sample of adults incarcerated in New York State, indicate the average distance between the prison location and family home is around 200 miles (Hickert et al., 2018; see also Lindsey et al., 2015). In addition to (re)connecting with community organizations and programming, reconnecting with family and friends is more challenging over long distances. As Tahamont (2013) summarizes, there is a “strong relationship between distance from home and whether an inmate receives a visit” (p. 53). In response to the challenges this poses for reentry and successful reintegration, a key provision of the First Step Act of 2018 was to “require BOP [the Bureau of Prisons] to house [federal] prisoners in facilities as close to their primary residence as possible” (Congressional Research Service, 2019, p. 17).

While assigning people to the closest prison has clear benefits, there is another potential local solution. Jails have long served as the front doors to local and state correctional systems—no one enters prison without passing through a jail. Yet increasingly, policymakers and practitioners are considering whether the location and capabilities of jails also position them to serve as the exit doors for those completing their prison sentences and reentering into

communities, part of a growing movement to refocus reentry efforts closer to home. Several jurisdictions have already adopted—or in some cases, have been compelled to adopt—policies that place soon-to-be released individuals in prison in the regional correctional facility closest to their home with access to comprehensive reentry services. A key example is the historic California Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011; along with several other legislative changes, the Act shifted thousands of individuals with low-level felonies from state to local correctional facilities in response to overcrowding issues. Realignment, which also removed the practice of returning those violating parole back to prison and encouraged “alternative sentences that rely less heavily on incarceration,” did not lead to higher levels of violent crime and was generally hailed as a success (Lofstrom & Raphael, 2016, p. 197). The experiences in California raise interesting questions about the capabilities and possibilities of jails as a key transition point in the reentry process.

Furthermore, rather than waiting for legislative restructuring, some jurisdictions have proactively adopted a “step-down” jail reentry model. A step-down model enables people incarcerated in state prisons to transfer to a jail facility in their local community to serve the last portion of their sentence and “step-down” to lower security classifications levels prior to release. For example, someone serving time at a state facility might be transferred to a medium security facility in a local jail campus within a year of their sentence completion date. Assuming no major security issues, the person would then gradually transition to lower security levels until they complete their sentences. During this time, the person could reconnect with local family and friends—including more accessible visits—and receive a higher dosage of reentry services. Given their knowledge of the incarcerated state population, connection to the local area, and access to local providers, County Sheriffs are arguably uniquely qualified to supervise and

support the reentry process. Furthermore, positioning jails as the local infrastructure in a streamlined process can be beneficial; reentry programs that begin pre-release and continue through the post-release period can increase employment and decrease recidivism (Cook et al., 2015).

In the current study, we evaluate whether jails—the entry point into local and state corrections—might also serve as effective reentry transition facilities for adults incarcerated in state prisons who are preparing to return back to their communities. The jail reentry step-down model program was pioneered in the 1990s in Hampden County, Massachusetts through a partnership between the MA Department of Correction (DOC) and Hampden County Sheriff’s Office (HCSO). Within one year of release, adults incarcerated in state prison facilities and returning to Hampden County transfer to HCSO for reentry services closer to home. The Hampden model has won numerous awards for its approach to service delivery and community integration, and the Massachusetts Department of Correction has developed step-down agreements with eight other counties throughout the state since the HCSO program began. With jail populations markedly down nationally in recent years (Minton et al., 2021), jurisdictions such as Erie County, NY are also seeking to repurpose jail facilities into reentry centers based on the Hampden model.<sup>1</sup> The current study was designed as a process, impact, and cost evaluation for this unique and well-developed program.

## **Review of the Relevant Literature**

Two key takeaways from prior reentry evaluations emphasize the importance of using practices informed by evidence, and the notion that location matters. Given that most community-based treatment services are locally provided at the town, county, and municipal

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with the Erie County Sheriff’s Office (January 2021). The superintendent has visited Hampden County to tour the local jail and prerelease and reentry centers.

level, transitioning incarcerated adults in state prisons to community-based correctional facilities closer to home during their final months of incarceration and providing them with locally connected reentry services makes intuitive sense. Individuals can be directly linked to nearby services, including housing assistance, healthcare, substance use support, educational opportunities, and job placement and retention support. As such, community organizations have an established ability to provide in-reach services within these facilities. Most importantly, local service providers can engage closely and frequently with the person's family, which has meaningful effects on reducing recidivism (diZerega & Shapiro, 2001; Fontaine et al., 2012; Naser & La Vigne, 2006).

There are promising examples of successful reentry initiatives in local facilities. For example, the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, a comprehensive county-based reentry program rated "effective" by NIJ's Crime Solutions.gov database (Willison et al., 2014), was found to reduce recidivism over a 12-month follow-up period. The HCSO jail reentry model and the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative have strong similarities in their design, development, and support. Programmatically, they feature in-custody reentry programming, coupled with transitional case management services as individuals step down to community-based supervision programs and released. In both models, selection and retention processes, curriculum, and case management services are designed in full conformance with evidence-based principles. Both enroll higher risk individuals who receive evidence-based services (such as cognitive behavioral interventions) that have been shown to reduce recidivism. Most importantly, both programs: (1) are the result of decades of planning and collaboration between the major county agencies and providers, (2) receive most of their funding and support from local sources, and (3) have strong accountability information systems. A key difference is that HCSO extends the Allegheny model

to serve those incarcerated in state facilities. In other words, in addition to those serving time in the HCSO jail before transitioning to the community, HCSO also provides services to the step-down state prison transfers.

In Massachusetts, evaluations of reentry programs developed in collaboration with county partners have also shown promising results. The Boston Reentry Initiative, a collaboration between the police, Sheriff's Department, and key criminal justice and social service stakeholders, targeted individuals with serious criminal histories and gang involvement and offered comprehensive reentry services along with reminders about future enhanced penalties of reoffending. Braga et al. (2009) found that the program meaningfully reduced recidivism. In a multi-site effort, the Offender Reentry Program was funded under SVORI as a collaboration between Hampden and Suffolk Sheriff's Departments. Each House of Correction ran a reentry program featuring extensive case management, reentry programming, and links to employment and education institutions. Piehl and LoBuglio (2005) conducted a preliminary evaluation of the results of the first year of the program's operations and also found significant recidivism reduction effects.

The evaluation literature on community correction centers (CCCs, or what are traditionally referred to as "halfway houses") also provides compelling evidence that local reentry strategies can improve reintegration success and decrease recidivism when following evidenced-based reentry principles. A meta-analysis of nine studies examining the effects of CCCs and community-based correctional facilities in Ohio found that these facilities improved recidivism outcomes for high-risk individuals; however, researchers found iatrogenic effects for programs serving low risk individuals (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2005). This aligns with the risk-



needs-responsivity principle that serves as the foundation for evidenced-based reentry practices (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Latessa et al., 2010; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2005).

Increasingly, correctional facilities are comprised of higher risk individuals. In Massachusetts (as in other states), sentencing reforms and diversion programming have resulted in a greater proportion of correctional populations being classified at security levels of medium or above. This is because individuals who would have been previously classified at lower security levels are diverted from entering the state prison system at all (see CCRC, 2022 for an overview of state diversion policies). While diversion can have a multitude of benefits, including improving employment and lowering recidivism (e.g., Mueller-Smith & Schnepel, 2021), and CCCs enable state prison transfers to receive a continuum of reentry services with local providers nearer their homes, such facilities may not be as well-equipped as a jail-based step-down program to work with the higher risk individuals returning home from state prisons.

Jail systems such as HCSO are one solution to this problem as they have the facilities, staffing, and policies and procedures to receive state prison transfer at all security levels. Through their classification process, jails can step-down individuals from higher security levels to community-based programs while ensuring that individuals are receiving reentry services closer to their homes and community providers. Such a step-down process enables those incarcerated in state prisons to transfer to medium-, minimum-, and low- security facilities in progressive steps that reduces their security level as their release date nears (Fretz, 2005). This process can be formalized in a way that sets clear expectations and incentives for incarcerated populations as they prepare for their return to the community. Assigning proper levels of supervision in the post-release period can help returning citizens adapt and connect to work, family, and programs that address their reentry needs (Piehl & LoBuglio, 2005). Strong

interagency collaborations, individualized plans, and access to a range of supportive staff and programs also enable a smooth transition process.

### **The Current Study**

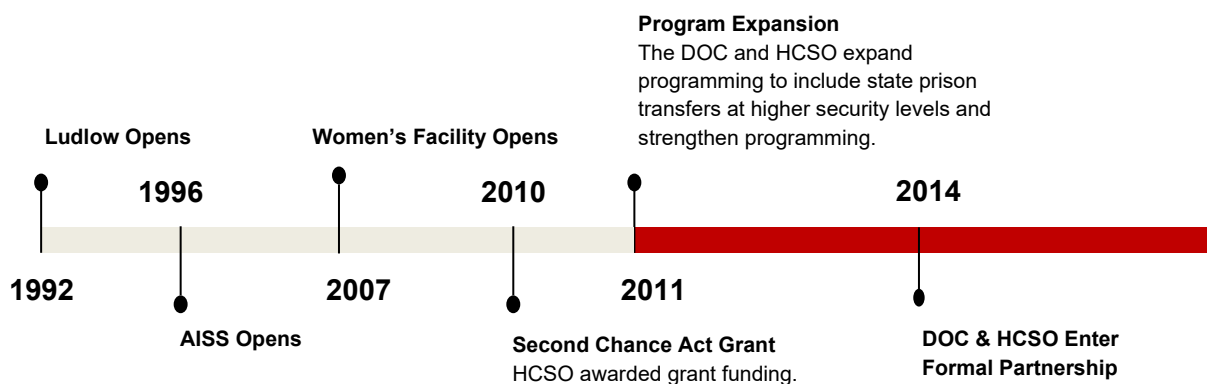
Since the early 1990s and more robustly since 2011, the MA Department of Correction (DOC) and Hampden County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) have partnered on a reentry step-down program, where adults incarcerated in a state prison facility and returning to Hampden County transfer to HCSO for reentry services closer to home while they complete the last year of their sentence. In addition to having the key step-down processes in place, the program model already contains the major components that are regarded as best practices for reentry programs. HCSO uses a validated risk assessment instrument (LSI-R screening version) to provide evidence-based programs that align with a person's individualized risks and needs (D'Amico & Kim, 2018; Lattimore et al., 2012; Lindquist et al., 2018) and has services and programs in place for each layer of the step-down process. The agency is sufficiently resourced, with accredited jails, correctional academy trained staff, the existing infrastructure to comprehensively address risks and needs, and strong interagency partners across levels of government and with local community providers (see e.g., La Vigne et al., 2008; Wiegand & Sussell, 2016). Furthermore, HCSO has learned what works well and which programmatic pieces should be adjusted over time, and staff continually improve the program model.

### *Original Evaluation Design Adaptations*

The original design included a process, impact, and cost-benefit analysis using program reports, documents, and administrative data, along with conducting interviews with service providers and stakeholders at Hampden County and the Department of Corrections. The key adaptation involves the impact analysis, which occurred as we became more deeply involved in

the process evaluation component. The original impact design involved a difference-in-differences approach, where Hampden County and Worcester County were the treatment and control groups, respectively. The design was based on a Second Chance Act Grant that the HCSO was awarded in 2010, which expanded reentry programming and program capacity starting in 2011. The grant also enabled the HCSO to include people at higher security levels in the step-down program (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Implementation of the Second Chance Act Grant



Notes: Hampden County's "Main Institution" is located in Ludlow, MA. AISS refers to All-Inclusive Support Services. For more information: <https://hcsoma.org/hcso-facilities/all-inclusive-support-services-2/>.

Worcester County did not receive a comparable grant at that time, and through conversations with staff at the Worcester County Sheriff's Office in March of 2022 we were able to confirm that reentry programming continued in that county as usual during that period.<sup>2</sup> We were also able to confirm through HCSO data (which we also verified using DOC data) that the proportion of people admitted to the step-down program notably increased in 2011 (from <2% in 2010 to 12% in 2011, which then almost doubled in 2012 before stabilizing).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the MA DOC had step-down agreements in place with nine counties throughout the state, including Worcester County. These agreements outline general eligibility requirements for participants returning to each respective county. However, we confirmed through a discussion with the former Director of Inmate Services in Worcester County that although their county had an agreement in place at the time, step-down programming was not being offered.

In addition to the intended assignment analysis, we also initially proposed individual-level matching to create more comparable treatment and control groups, where step-down participants in Hampden would be paired with similar Worcester County individuals released from prison at approximately the same time. While we went into the project with a solid foundation of how the program worked in theory, the process evaluation, data exploration, and attempts at matching for the impact analysis provided additional insight into the details of program eligibility. For example, we learned more about non-formalized decision rules and inconsistency in participant perceptions about whether step-down was optional or mandated. This additional information we learned, paired with data limitations—most notably, the inability to obtain institutional misconduct or health information that can influence program eligibility and the inability to observe fully linked criminal histories, which is important for certain “ever” offense restrictions—led us to conclude that a matching analysis would be unlikely to generate a well-identified counterfactual. Therefore, we stayed with the initial county-level analysis.

While our impact analysis was more limited than anticipated, we were able to incorporate focus groups with current step-down study participants. Information gleaned from these focus groups, and the process evaluation more generally, revealed that the program underwent notable implementation changes over time. As a result, we updated our cost analysis to include a flexible, publicly accessible tool for policymakers and practitioners. The interactive tool enables users to estimate the cost of step-down services depending on their jurisdiction’s available resources and service needs.

## *Data and Methods*

### Process Evaluation

To understand the step-down journey, the researchers participated in three day-long site visits at the Hampden County Correctional Center where we toured medium- and minimum-security facilities as well as the All-Inclusive Support Services (AISS), an organization that provides services including employment support, housing assistance, and substance use/mental health treatment to returning citizens and members of the Hampden community more generally. During this time, we conducted interviews with staff and stakeholders to better understand the suite of programming provided to participants and were given access to program documents, reclassification matrices, and internal research reports. Additionally, we conducted five focus groups with program participants, including one with all female participants. One focus group was conducted at the medium security facility, where many participants begin their step-down journeys. The additional four focus groups were conducted at the minimum-security pre-release center where many step-down participants conclude their journeys.

### Impact Evaluation

The Massachusetts Department of Correction (MADOC) provided us with individual-level data for 6,087 individuals released from state prison in Hampden County (treatment) and Worcester County (control).<sup>3</sup> Each observation in the dataset is associated with a release from DOC custody that occurred between 2004 and 2017 (n=7,577 observations)<sup>4</sup>. The sample is primarily White (74%) or Black (23%), although close to 40% of the observations are identified

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<sup>3</sup> This does not include observations provided by the DOC that were ultimately dropped from the dataset. Observations were dropped if they were outside the scope of the current study (e.g., associated with a return county other than Hampden or Worcester or associated with commitments for sex offenses), missing key information (such as case identifiers or outcome data) or associated with a person who knowingly died (i.e., those who did not recidivate and had a recorded death during the three-year follow-up period).

<sup>4</sup> 2017 is the cut-off date to enable three years of follow-up recidivism data before the pandemic began in 2020.

in DOC data as Hispanic.<sup>5</sup> Around 76% are male releases, and the average age is 34.6 years old at the time of release.

Each release is also associated with a recidivism event if the individual connected to that event was reincarcerated within three years of the release date (yes/no). In supplemental analyses we also consider 1- and 2-year recidivism events. For the simple difference-in-differences analysis we ran a regression with a time (pre/post program implementation) variable, county (Hampden/Worcester), and time\*county interaction. We also descriptively plot recidivism to build intuition about trends for the parallel lines assumption.

### Cost Evaluation

There are two common estimation strategies for a cost-benefit analysis: top-down and bottom-up (Roman, 2013). Top-down approaches take the total annual budget to run a program and divide that figure by the number of participants, whereas a bottom-up approach identifies the unit cost of individual services made available through the program (e.g., job readiness workshop) and uses these costs to estimate total program costs per individual. Given the limited availability of state-level data required to estimate costs using a top-down approach,<sup>6</sup> this study uses a bottom-up approach using programmatic data provided to the Special Commission on Correctional Funding by the Massachusetts Sheriffs Association for Fiscal Year 2023.<sup>7</sup> While it would be useful to include retrospective cost data (at the time the program occurred) to generate

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<sup>5</sup> Among the approximately 3,000 Hispanic observations in our data, 88% were White-Hispanic, with close to 6% identifying as Black-Hispanic.

<sup>6</sup> In fiscal year 2019, the Hampden County Sheriff's Office reported spending \$616,275 on their step-down program. This line item contains three spending categories: wages and salaries (\$597,788), employee benefits (\$9,321), and operating expenses (\$9,166). Interviews with stakeholders suggest that this amount does not adequately capture the money required to operate the program.

<sup>7</sup> The mission of the 2020 Special Commission was to "conduct a comprehensive study to evaluate and make recommendations regarding the appropriate level of funding for the department of correction and each sheriff's department." As part of this project, Sheriff's departments throughout the state were asked to provide line-item estimates for all programming made available at their facilities (<https://correctionalfunding.com/charge/>).

a cost-benefit ratio in a traditional cost-benefit analysis, as noted above, given methodological challenges we do not have point estimates from the impact analysis that we are confident in. Instead, we are interested in using current program cost estimates to provide the most policy-relevant information to practitioners and decision makers in other jurisdictions.

## **Results**

### *Process Evaluation*

What follows is a description of the step-down program as it operated during the study period (2004-2017) based on historical documents, conversations with staff, tours, and other resources. We then summarize key findings from focus group participants that we conducted during the evaluation (post-study period). The step-down program has undergone programmatic changes since 2017—including the merger of two key facilities—and large-scale societal changes also likely impacted program delivery after the study period (e.g., COVID-19 and the rise of decarceration policies at the state and national levels). However, combining historical program operations with modern-day perceptions can provide unique insight into program strengths and areas for potential improvement for other jurisdictions contemplating adopting a step-down program.

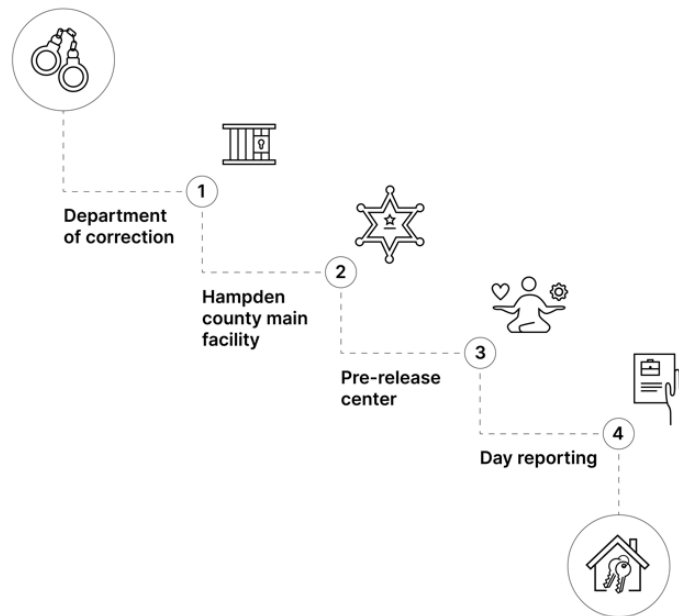
### Step-Down Program Components

The HCSO program is designed to improve reintegration outcomes, including increased employment for returning citizens and decreased future involvement in the criminal justice system. The step-down program relies on a few distinct design elements to pursue these outcomes. Most simply, it re-centers reentry activities on the communities that incarcerated individuals will be returning to. This could have clear benefits, such as allowing someone to

continue with a transitional employer after release, or establishing medical care with a primary care provider close to home.

In addition to “stepping-down” from state prison to a local jail, there are also opportunities for individuals to “step-down” through security levels once they have arrived at the Hampden County facility (steps 2-4 in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Illustration of the Step-Down Process



In an ideal version of the step-down journey, an individual’s treatment plan will prepare them to be reclassified at lower levels of security at regular intervals. Each reclassification is associated with increased autonomy and opportunities to prosocially engage with their home community. Throughout the journey, participants are exposed to a variety of programs and services that are intended to help them build life skills, address mental health or substance use disorders, and establish connections with community partners that will provide wrap-around services as they transition home. Below is a discussion of the core milestones of the step-down process, including:



- Selection to participate in step-down and possible security reclassification;
- Assessment, development of a treatment plan, and orientation; and
- Regular reassessment and graduation to lower security levels (medium, pre-release, and Day Reporting).

### Selection and Reclassification Processes

Through the process evaluation we learned about several exclusionary criteria that might have made an individual ineligible to participate in the step-down program. For example, individuals ever convicted of a sex offense were not selected for step-down during the study period. Additionally, individuals who (a) had serious medical needs that exceeded Hampden County's capacity for care; or (b) those with serious misconduct infractions during incarceration would also have been unable to participate in the step-down program. Individuals in pre-release selected to participate in the step-down program during the study period had the option to decline. Individuals in minimum and medium security could appeal the step-down placement to a board, but the DOC ultimately determines an incarcerated individual's placement. Some current-day focus group participants suggested that refusing to participate could result in disciplinary action, such as being reclassified as a higher security risk at the state facility where they opted to remain. While our HCSO partners indicated it is possible that some individuals felt compelled to participate, our DOC and HCSO partners made it clear that was not the intention of the program policy and that facilities assign level of security according to specific disciplinary and safety parameters. We have limited data from step-down participants, and it is unclear whether refusal to participate resulted in disciplinary action or whether this was an uncommon occurrence.

Those who were identified as eligible and agreed to participate in the program experienced different starting points, depending on their initial assessment and classification. Upon arrival, participants were reclassified according to a county classification matrix which

takes into consideration crime type and risk level. Additionally, new step-down participants who arrived at Hampden were assessed by a case manager who administered a risk assessment (LSI-R) and a substance use assessment (developed by Texas Christian University), followed by documenting a narrative account of the individual's history. The case manager would then begin the process of creating a plan for the participant's time at Hampden. At this step in the process, all step-down participants attended a three-day orientation during which facility rules, processes, and opportunities were explained. Additionally, unit and central classification boards reviewed each housing placement.

For many, the initial transfer was to the medium security county jail in Ludlow (men) or Chicopee (women), MA, operated by the Hampden County Sheriff's Office. In this scenario, the person would be housed at the main institution until completion of sanction and/or programmatic milestones, at which point unit classification (which includes unit case manager, the superintendent of the unit, the captain, and mental health specialists) and central classification work together to approve reclassification to lower security level. It was always the goal to return individuals "returned to higher security" to the minimum setting whenever possible and appropriate to do so. In the main institution, program participants were afforded the same opportunities as those serving county sentences.

For participants who were re-classified as minimum risk by the HCSO classification staff, there were two possible pathways. If the participant was determined to require substance use disorder treatment, they would be sent to a minimum-security recovery and wellness facility in Springfield, MA, where they would receive specialized programming. If individuals did not require substance treatment, step-down participants classified as minimum-security risk would be sent to a minimum-security pre-release facility, which until 2021 was located in Ludlow. At this facility, step-down participants had more privileges relative to those housed at the medium security jail. No longer considered “inmates,” residents at the Pre-Release Center (PRC) were permitted to wear their own clothes and jewelry, use their own toiletries, and self-manage their unstructured time outside of mandatory programming. In-person visitation, a key to one’s own room and locker, and a more normalized environment similar to a college dormitory provided a milieu decidedly different than medium security setting. Here, residents attended programming outlined on their individual service plan, which could include a focus on victim impact, anger management, domestic violence, parenting,

**Program Spotlight: Job Readiness Clinic**

Prior to participating in work-release, residents enroll in a 3-day employment readiness clinic where they learn about participating in the workforce. This includes honing skills such as:

- Creating a resume
- Searching and applying for jobs
- Interviewing skills
- Maintaining employment.

As part of the clinic, they also are coached on other “life skills,” including:

- Banking
- Building and repairing credit
- Balancing personal/work life.

Prior to participating in the clinic, HCSO aids the resident in securing documentation needed for employment (e.g., a social security card or birth certificate).

To learn more about workforce preparation at Hampden, please see Appendix A.

self-help (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous), or religious services. Although the time to complete programs varied, a 3–4-month timeline was typical.<sup>8</sup>

An important part of pre-release is preparing residents to re-enter the workforce upon release. First, residents would participate in supervised restitution work crew (performing community maintenance such as trash removal or county park upkeep) for which they were paid between \$1-\$5 per day. After completing the restitution crew work requirement, residents could become eligible to work at jobs in the community for market wages. Transportation to and from work occurs through the bus system or by PRC staff. HCSO has a relationship with 540 community employers to help facilitate employment, although residents could work with established businesses outside of these community employers. The HCSO employment team also helped employers apply for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) if eligible.<sup>9</sup>

The last phase of step-down is Day Reporting. Day Reporting eligibility occurs through a process of screening per the Matrix, interviews by Day Reporting staff, and evaluation of the home plan. The home plan evaluation requires a home visit and verification that the ankle monitoring equipment can be installed, that the area is relatively safe, and the sponsor is both appropriate and willing to sponsor the individual. Day Reporting is the final and most independent step-down phase, as Day Reporting participants live in their own homes (or the home of a relative or community sponsor, which may be a residential treatment program) and are electronically monitored via ankle bracelet. Day Reporting participants schedule daily itineraries documenting their proposed location in 15-minute increments. If an individual is “out of place”

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<sup>8</sup> Individuals with Community Access privileges approved by the Classification Board may attend community events and travel with approved sponsors to fellowship meetings in the community. Classification is reviewed at 60-day increments. Upon departure from the wellness facility (either to the Pre-Release minimum security facility or at the end of their sentence) a detailed Discharge Plan is provided. The Plan summarizes all treatment and community engagement progress, key milestones, relapse prevention plans, and community support “aftercare” arrangements.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wotc>.

for more than 30 minutes, it is at the department’s discretion to revoke this privilege or have the individual arraigned on escape charges. Day Reporting is only available for individuals who have spent sufficient time at the pre-release facility in the judgment of the Classification Board.

Although participants will ideally step down through multiple stages before release, it is not always possible for them to do so, and individuals are released from any facility at any point on the continuum, based on sentence expiration or parole. Somewhat often, an individual’s release date will arrive prior to their having completed programming, either because the pace of their progress was slower than anticipated or because they continued to earn good time while at HCSO and therefore completed their sentence earlier than expected.

### Implementation Fidelity

We conducted five focus groups to discuss the experience of step-down participants who resided in the pre-release facility in the summer of 2022. Although participants provided feedback on program as it exists in the present day—rather than the period of our study (2004-2017)—these discussions provided useful insight into how the transfer between state and county facilities can, in some cases, present obstacles to reentry. At the same time, it is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic also may have affected participant experience.<sup>10</sup> Summary recommendations based on these conversations, along with a series of conversations with service providers and HCSO staff, have been consolidated into a tip sheet (Appendix A).

Two overarching themes emerged from these discussions: 1) whether programs and opportunities are comparable between the state facility and step-down site, and 2) avoiding duplicative programming requirements whenever feasible. Many of the current-day participants expressed that meaningful work opportunities, and opportunities for earning “good time” through

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to altering how programming was implemented, the pandemic also influenced correctional populations, which may have contributed to different participant experiences with step-down services.

program participation, were more limited at the HCSO facility than at the DOC. Limits on the ability to work could be especially pronounced for individuals who had previously been classified as minimum security by the DOC, and who had previously earned the right to engage in steady, well-paying work assignments. Some participants explained that they were reclassified<sup>11</sup> upon arrival at Hampden County—per the county-specific classification criteria—and therefore not immediately afforded the opportunity to work. Although the reclassification could be overridden, the process was lengthy and cumbersome, and could result in an individual waiting months before becoming eligible to participate in work-release. Participants spoke about the importance of building savings to support their reentry, and they believed that they were at a disadvantage compared to their peers who completed their sentence at a DOC facility. Similarly, the focus group participants noted differences in rules and regulations regarding visitation at DOC and HCSO. The focus groups were conducted in the aftermath of the pandemic, and HCSO staff noted in-person visitation was one of the last program elements to return. The focus group participants emphasized challenges they encountered with the lack of contact visits with family and loved ones in step-down, and to their recollection, contact visits were available in DOC custody during the same timeframe. While they recognized the benefits of being physically closer to family, they saw this change as detrimental to their goal of reconnecting with support systems.

Participants also noted that the programming available to them at the county facility heavily emphasized substance use disorder (SUD) treatment. Although many participants acknowledged having struggled with substance use at one point in their lives, many also expressed that the treatment provided at the county level was not geared towards individuals who

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<sup>11</sup> While reclassification can refer to a shift from medium to minimum security, some of the participants we spoke to were in the pre-release facility (minimum) but still ineligible to work because their governing offense was violent.

had previously participated in extensive SUD treatment and were at an advanced stage of their recovery journey. As they explained, having to participate in programming alongside individuals serving short jail sentences who were new to recovery could have very different treatment needs. It had not always been the case that step-down participants engaged in treatment programming with these individuals. Previously, individuals serving county sentences who had been determined to require substance use treatment were provided with programming in a separate facility; however, in 2021 Hampden merged their minimum pre-release facility with their minimum wellness and recovery facility. As such, these two populations, which had once been treated separately, were now treated together. As one participant who spent five years in a state facility noted:

“I’ve had so much programming...I already know everything they’re teaching because I’ve been taught it for five years...I could stand up in front of the class and teach this class.”

That Hampden combined these two facilities is understandable, especially in light of decarceration efforts that made it unrealistic or untenable to maintain two separate facilities for a rapidly dwindling population of residents. Still, agencies developing step-down programs must abide by the evidence-based practice of individualizing treatment plans based on assessed risks and needs of each person. In combining populations, the agency must ensure the ability to differentiate treatment plans, which requires retaining a range of treatment programs. In addition, when population are combined, step-down participants may make comparisons to the privileges provided to the other group(s), which could create some competition or negative perceptions.

### *Impact Evaluation*

The first step in the impact evaluation was to conduct a difference-in-differences analysis at the county-level. As displayed in Table 1, which focuses on the three-year recidivism outcome

measure, Hampden County experienced around a 4.8 percentage point decrease in recidivism compared to Worcester County. This is suggestive that there may be something interesting happening in Hampden County during the study period, and the step-down program is a large-scale initiative that could be contributing to this decline. However, we are unable to identify this as the cause from this analysis; analyses based on the intended program assignment can only provide suggestive evidence of aggregate-level trends and changes.

Table 1. Impact Analysis (n=7,577)

	Pre-period	Post-period	Diff (Post-Pre)
Hampden County (T)	0.439	0.309	-0.13
Worcester County (C)	0.460	0.378	-.082
Diff (T-C)	-0.020	-0.069	-0.048*

Notes: This estimates the program eligibility effect, or the difference between the treatment (Hampden) and control (Worcester) county recidivism averages regardless of who participated in the step-down program. \*p<.05

The two-year results are almost identical (-.046; se=0.022, p=0.034),<sup>12</sup> although the one-year recidivism analysis finds a smaller and non-significant effect size (-0.012; se=0.019, p=0.547).

This suggests a lack of evidence for short-term recidivism effects.

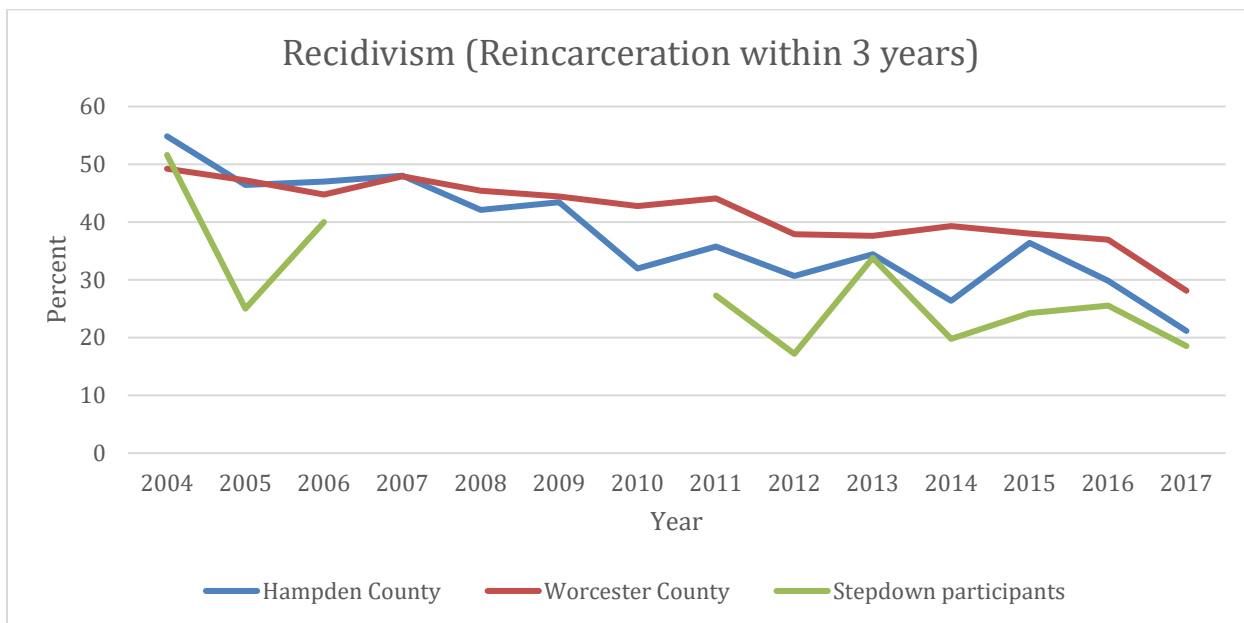
However, difference-in-differences analyses rely on the parallel lines assumption, meaning the trends for the treatment group (Hampden County) and comparison group (Worcester County) had similar patterns before the intervention took place. This is key because this design uses the pre-period paths to create the counterfactual, or what we expect would have happened if Hampden County never experienced the Second Chance Act grant and subsequent program expansion. Yet as displayed in Figure 3, there are two concerns. First, the lines cross in 2007, which is a clear violation of the parallel lines assumption. Second, the patterns suggest there may

<sup>12</sup> There were only 459 observations that had a recidivism event within three years but not two years, and this subgroup was closely split between the two counties.



be something occurring in 2009 that influenced recidivism rates—which is before the intervention. Therefore, recidivism may have already been declining for other reasons prior to the 2010 grant.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 3. Reincarceration Within Three Years by County



Note: Years with less than 10 stepdown participants are removed from the graph.

One potential solution is to use a matched difference-in-differences at the individual level. However, we encountered a second analytic complication: we were not able to convincingly match people across the two counties. The key reason involved data limitations—we were unable to observe factors we understood to be highly influential in the stepdown program decision processes, including serious health issues and disciplinary infractions while incarcerated and fully linked criminal histories (which is important for determining certain “ever” offense restrictions). Through the process evaluation, we also detected uncertainty and

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the events described in Figure 1, there were several events that may have influenced operations in Hampden County, such as the reduction of school safety zones, CORI reform, and “Raise the Age.” However, these events were state-wide, and should have similarly influenced operations in both Worcester and Hampden County. It is possible other ongoing reentry efforts specific to Hampden County also influenced these trend lines.

varying discretion in stepdown placements, including hesitation from current step-down participants that may be connected to a historical opting out of the program for some people (in a non-random, and unobservable way). As a result of being unable to confidently determine selection criteria for the program in the matching exercise we are unable to further investigate the trends we see in Figure 3—i.e., we would not know if we were actually making “apples to apples” comparisons between the two groups because we knowingly cannot observe (and therefore match on) important characteristics that we believe are correlated with program selection and outcomes.

While the current evaluation (and particularly the process evaluation) was immensely helpful for detecting these issues, and as a result we were able to avoid producing estimates that we believe would be unreliable but portrayed as causal, we were unfortunately limited in what we can say about the impact of this step-down program. The lower levels of recidivism for the step-down participants group in Figure 3, in other words, could be influenced by the program, or could be reflecting selection bias, and we are unable to tease out the two possibilities.

### *Cost Evaluation*

#### General Reentry Program Estimates

Reentry programs generally have been shown or predicted to have several cost and social benefits. For example:

- Participation in the Maryland Reentry Partnership Initiative was correlated with a reduction in offending and researchers estimated that this program returned approximately \$3 in benefits per \$1 in costs. Net benefits to the citizens of Baltimore

were approximately \$21,500 per participant, and this cost saving was mostly attributed to reduced risk of victimization (Roman et al., 2007).<sup>14</sup>

- The Council of Economic Advisors (CEA, 2018) found that programs focused on mental health and substance use had both short- and long-term cost savings. When considering total returns to taxpayers, the CEA estimates at least \$1.47 (and potentially over \$5) per taxpayer dollar. While these estimates were based on sizable declines in recidivism (21% for mental health programming and 17% for substance use programming), this report estimates that substance use treatment would only have to decrease recidivism by 3.2% to “break even.”
- In an assessment of 45 reentry programs, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2017) found that 64% had at least a 75% chance of “breaking even.”

Table 2. Cost Benefit Estimates for Reentry Services

Estimated Recidivism Reduction	Potential Return per \$1 in Costs	Source
2% (in house services)	Break-even	Roman & Chalfin (2006)
5% (contracted services)	Break-even	Roman & Chalfin (2006)
5.6%	\$3-\$7	Roman et al. (2007)
17%-21%	\$1.47 to \$5.27	CEA (2018)

As noted in Table 2, there is a wide range of potential benefits accrued for programs (from \$1.47 to \$7) and overlaps in potential returns even when the estimated recidivism reductions notably vary.<sup>15</sup> Still, there is evidence to suggest that jail-based reentry programs only need to modestly reduce recidivism in order to break-even. According to a report published by the Urban Institute, the authors summarize:

“Under a variety of conditions, jail-based reentry programs would have to reduce recidivism by less than two percent to offset the cost of jail-based programming. Put another way, we find that reentry programs for jail-based inmates produce benefits large

<sup>14</sup> Participants in the Maryland Reentry Partnership were significantly less likely to experience any new arrest. Other measurements of recidivism (e.g., committing fewer crimes, or committing crimes that cause less harm) were not significant.

<sup>15</sup> There is also evidence that programs that improve LSR-I scores have been shown to improve recidivism in some cases. For example, one study found that among high-risk individuals, a 10% improvement in LSR-I score was associated with a 6% decrease in recidivism rates (Prell & Smith, 2009). Although we were unable to analyze LSR-I data in this study, there is some research to support that even relatively short re-entry programs can significantly improve these scores for participants (Holliday et al., 2012).

enough to offset the cost of the investment with only a modest reduction in crime.”  
(Roman & Chalfin, 2006, p. 1)

Furthermore, the authors indicate that 70% of benefits accrue to the community, as compared to 30% accrued to the criminal justice system. Assuming the criminal justice system is not looking to recoup costs from reentry programming, reentry programs would not need to significantly reduce recidivism to provide net benefits. In the context of reentry, breaking even is extremely beneficial: shifting costs of incarceration to activities that promote successful reintegration and personal development could have invisible or intangible advantages or long-term intergenerational effects that cannot be fully captured in research studies. In other words, “public officials can get more bang for their buck” by investing in alternatives to incarceration (Chalfin & Street 2023, p.5).

#### Estimates Specific to Hampden’s Step-Down Program<sup>16</sup>

Comprehensive reentry programming can be beneficial for multiple reasons, even if difficult to study (see, e.g., Willison 2019), but a multi-layered approach often leads to new costs for prospective stakeholders to consider. For the HCSO step-down program, services could fall into one of five program categories: 1) Community Reinvestments, 2) Educational and Vocational, 3) Treatment (including Behavioral Health, Mental Health, Substance Use, or Other), 4) Religious/Spiritual, and 5) Support/Mentorship. They can be further categorized as “essential” or “recommended but not essential” to the successful operation of the step-down program (Program Type). Our HCSO partners identified 74 programs as essential, and around a third of these programs (n=25) are statutorily required for correctional agencies in

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<sup>16</sup> As mentioned earlier, this analysis relies on estimates for program costs provided by the Special Commission for Correctional Funding. As such, it does not consider overhead costs such as facilities, food, or healthcare. Additionally, this does not calculate costs net the savings experienced by the DOC by transferring an individual out of state-provided programming. Finally, it should be noted that the upper-bounds estimates are likely only relevant to institutions with little or no existing infrastructure. This is discussed in more detail later in this section.

Massachusetts. State mandated programs—which our partners agreed were critical for any step-down program—include adult basic education, religious services, and English for speakers of other languages. HCSO research staff identified an additional 82 programs as “recommended but not essential.” Only one recommended program is statutorily required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.<sup>17</sup> Examples of different programs, including both essential and non-essential (but recommended) options, are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Programming Examples

	Category Type	Description	Statutorily Mandated
<b>Essential</b>			
AISS Employment Retention	Educational/Vocational	AISS Employment Retention. Education and peer support for employment sustainability, consistency, etiquette, problem resolution, and how to succeed in workplace cultures.	No
Group Therapy	Behavioral Health / Mental Health / Substance Use / Other Treatment	Group Therapy led by trained and supervised SUD counseling staff	No
Protestant Services	Religious/Spiritual	Protestant Services/Worship in English and Spanish	Yes
<b>Not Essential</b>			
SAVR	Support/Mentorship	Stress, Anger & Violence Reduction through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction	No
Community Reinvestment: K9 Support	Community Reinvestment	Security dogs: Highly-trained dogs of various breeds that are trained in jail, building search, drug detection, apprehension and rescue operations.	No

<sup>17</sup> Cost estimates are not available for 10% of the “essential” programs (n=7) and approximately 7% (n=6) of the recommended programs. The figures listed here include programming geared toward individuals serving sentences for sex crimes. It is worth noting that Hampden County does not presently offer their step-down program to individuals convicted of sex crimes, but they do acknowledge that, ideally, step-down services would be able to serve anyone who planned to return to their community, regardless of crime-type.

To provide base estimates, we calculate the costs of providing essential and recommended programming using line-item programmatic estimates generated by the HCSO. In the spending matrix, each program had two associated figures: annual salary costs and operating costs (excluding employee salaries). Programs could be exclusive to women participants, male participants, or could allow mixed-gender participation. As a result, programs that were administered to men and women separately, such as adult basic education, would appear twice in the matrix—once for men, and once for women. Additionally, each program was associated with a maximum capacity of individuals that the county could serve in a fiscal year.

Our goal was to determine the unit level cost of providing each essential and recommended service (e.g., job readiness training or Alcoholics Anonymous) to a cohort of 50 step-down participants over one year. Given the overrepresentation of men in the criminal justice system, we limited the number of women participants to 10% of the cohort (women n=5; men n=45). We then calculated the percent of 2023 program service capacity that would be filled by eligible participants in the 50-person cohort. For example, if program service A had an annual capacity of 90 participants and served only men, the 45 men in the step-down cohort would account for 50% of program service A’s overall capacity. This figure was then used to recalculate operating costs and the salary costs of employees.<sup>18</sup>

Table 4 shows the costs associated with providing essential and not essential (recommended) programming to the men (N=45) and women (N=5) in the hypothetical cohort over a one-year period. Column 4 (“Both Men & Women”) represents the cost of programs that allow for mixed gender participation and are not listed as separate items in the spending matrix.

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<sup>18</sup> There were two programs for which we did not have data regarding the annual capacity. For these two cases, we used the total number of individuals served in FY2023.

Table 4. Essential and Non-Essential Programming Costs

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Both Men &amp; Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Essential</b>	\$306,750	\$186,812	\$333,586	\$827,148
<b>Not Essential</b>	\$1,480,932	\$140,521	\$140,868	\$1,762,321
<b>Total</b>	\$1,787,683	\$327,333	\$474,454	\$2,589,469

The total estimated cost of **essential** programming is \$827,148. The total cost of **recommended** programming is \$1,762,321. The total annual cost of both required and recommended programming is \$2,589,469.

Another way to illustrate essential and recommended costs is by program category. As displayed in Table 5, the bulk of essential costs provided to step-down participants involves educational and vocational training (82%) or treatment programs (14%). Recommended program options reflect a similar pattern (90% educational/vocational programming; 7% treatment).

Table 5. Cost by Program Category and Type<sup>19</sup>

	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Recommended</b>	<b>Total</b>
Community Reinvestments	Cost data not available	Cost data not available	Cost data not available
Educational and Vocational	\$687,173	\$1,575,847	\$2,263,021
Treatment	\$113,975	\$131,944	\$245,920
Religious/Spiritual	\$17,794	\$21,176	\$38,970
Support/Mentorship	\$8,205	\$33,354	\$41,559
<b>Total</b>	\$827,148	\$1,762,321	\$2,589,469

Taken together, these figures allow us to roughly estimate the upper-bound cost per person of providing programming. Should a stakeholder wish to build a step-down program from the ground up, with little existing programmatic infrastructure in place, providing the essential suite of programming would cost roughly \$16,543 per participant per year. Were they to provide

<sup>19</sup> Treatment includes behavioral and mental health treatment, as well as substance use disorders.

both the essential and recommended suite of programming, this number would increase to \$51,789 per person per year. However, it must be noted that these estimates are likely inflated for several reasons. First, it is unlikely that a jurisdiction looking to implement jail-based step-down programming does not have any programmatic infrastructure already in place, and this is likely particularly true of statutorily mandated programs (to see cost estimates that exclude statutorily mandated programs, see Appendix B). Second, it is not probable that all 50 participants will avail themselves of all essential program services, let alone all of the additional recommended program options over the course of one year. As such, staffing and operating costs are likely to be much lower. It also must be noted that the county might not incur 100% of the costs of providing programming. In the case of Hampden, not all programs are funded exclusively by the county Sherriff’s office. Table 6 shows the costs which are covered entirely by the Sheriff’s department, the costs which are split with another entity or organization, and the costs which are covered by an outside funding source (e.g., a state or federal grant).

Table 6. Program Funding Sources

<b>Costs Covered...</b>	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Recommended</b>
Entirely by Sheriff’s Office line-item appropriation	36%	80%
Partially by Sheriff’s Office line-item appropriation	63%	11%
By other funding source (e.g., grants)	<1%	8%

Finally, as mentioned earlier, it is likely that jail facilities interested in implementing a step-down program already have some—or even most—of the programmatic elements already in place, and this is especially true of statutorily mandated services such as Adult Basic Education. In this case, these existing programs can be leveraged—with little additional cost—to serve a



new population of individuals serving state sentences that would benefit from the opportunity of preparing for reentry closer to home. In Hampden County, for example, the jail facility offers reentry programming to both step-down participants *and* individuals serving much shorter county jail sentences.<sup>20</sup> As such, step-down participants are integrated into a programmatic infrastructure that already exists, and the costs to serve them are lower.

Per-participant cost estimates for reentry programming during the pre-period may give us some sense of how drastically the per-person cost of providing reentry programming can fluctuate depending on existing infrastructure. A report by the Urban Institute estimated that HCSO spent only \$392 in staffing costs per individual for reentry services in FY 2005 (Roman & Chalfin, 2006). Adjusted for inflation, this amounts to approximately \$611 in 2023 dollars. Although Hampden was not able to provide operations costs, the report used similar programming in Montgomery County to estimate the county spent \$97 per resident in non-staff costs. Adjusted for inflation, this amounts to a little over \$150 in 2023 dollars. Assuming an annual cohort of 50 step-down participants, and acknowledging that the programming provided in the pre-period was significantly less robust than what is provided today, a cost of \$41,350 could provide a potential lower-bound estimate for jurisdictions interested in developing step-down programs that already have a robustly developed infrastructure.

Finally, we used these estimates to create an online calculator that would allow Sheriff's departments across the state to estimate the cost of running a step-down program for 50 participants (annually) in their jurisdiction, assuming no additional costs for buildings or

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the HCSO's correctional campus includes individuals sentenced to House of Correction (HOC) stays in addition to those detained in the county jail. The HOC model is unique to Massachusetts; rather than just the traditional options of jail (typically less than one year) or prison (typically over a year), individuals who are sentenced to up to 2.5 years in Massachusetts are housed in county-run HOC facilities. Housing people for longer periods of time may provide additional incentives and possibilities for providing county-level reentry services.

infrastructure. The tool was built in Tableau with feedback from HCSO’s research and communications teams, and we anticipate it will be publicly released in the Summer of 2024.<sup>21</sup>

## **Discussion**

Step-down jail reentry programs, where individuals incarcerated in state prison facilities move closer to home prior to release and serve the last portion of their sentence in a county jail facility, hold a lot of promise. Reintegration processes that take place within the returning person’s local community can add a critical stabilizing component to the reentry experience, and jails, which are locally operated and run, exist in most counties in the United States. As jail-beds are more secure and controlled than traditional halfway houses, they also offer opportunities to reenter individuals convicted of serious crimes who are at higher risk of habitual violent reoffending. The localized nature of these facilities could provide a continuum of wraparound services and programs to support the transition into the community.

The idea of step-down reentry is also gaining popularity; as of 2024, the Massachusetts Department of Correction had agreements in place with nine of the fourteen counties in the Commonwealth (and was working on entering an agreement with another county), although there is variation in experience, investment, and engagement with step-down across the counties. More broadly there is the potential for the expanded use of step-down reentry programs through a new Commission under a recent Senate budget that passed in Massachusetts.<sup>22</sup> Recent research in Michigan has also drawn attention to the potential for jails to improve reintegration outcomes

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<sup>21</sup> The current platform is located at <https://hampden-county-stepdown-program.mailchimpsites.com/> and the Tableau sheets can be accessed through that website or directly [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> See section 85(a): “There shall be a special commission to study and examine opportunities for collaboration and consolidation among the department of correction, the county sheriffs, the parole board and the office of community corrections. For the purposes of this section, ‘facility’ shall include a correctional facility, house of correction and jail.” Available online: <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2025/SenateWaysMeansBudget>

through rehabilitative programming that can be built into existing jail structures (Alsan et al. 2024).

However, it is worth noting that there are other criminal justice interventions that move people from one system to another for logical and well-meaning reasons, but which seem to rely on faulty assumptions that ultimately compromise the intention. One example is “Raise the Age” policies, which raised the age limit for juvenile jurisdiction to keep young people out of the adult criminal system. Ultimately, this policy may have increased recidivism in Massachusetts—and even resulted in more adolescents being incarcerated—because moving adolescents into the juvenile justice system made it less likely their cases would be dismissed (Loeffler & Braga, 2022). Our partners at HSCO also noted that policies like Raise the Age could pose additional and unanticipated safety challenges for younger adolescents in those facilities, especially if older adolescents (18-20) convicted of or held on serious violent offences are moved into juvenile facilities.

In the case of step-down, many of the key assumptions surrounding the benefits of being closer to home prior to release are connected to social and human capital. For example, an incarcerated individual could work a local job before release and continue in that job post-release, or he could develop deeper roots and connections with potential employers, service providers, and family members by having local access (or in the case of family, contact visits) before release. We know from our focus group conversations that both of these assumptions were difficult to meet for at least some HCSO step-down participants at some points in time—many of the modern-day participants we spoke with indicated they were not allowed contact visits or did not have access to work. Some of these issues may have been related to pandemic disruptions, but still raise important considerations about step-down design and implementation

for new jurisdictions considering program adoption. When considering the lessons other jurisdictions could take from the HCSO's experiences with several decades of step-down program implementation, we would recommend the following conversations across stakeholders (including state and county correctional officials) and policymakers (including policy analysts, legislators, and those with budgetary approval roles):

- *What is the goal (or goals) of the step-down program?*

For example, is it to improve outcomes for incarcerated people entering the community, reduce incarceration, reduce costs for the state, or something else? As LoBuglio (2009) notes, the financial “incentive problem” is a critical consideration for any reentry programming. It may be possible for states to pursue multiple goals with a step-down program, but there is also a danger that these goals may be in tension.

- *What does the program look like, and which programs or services are essential for success?*

During this project our research team developed great admiration for the hard work, competence, and dedication of the HCSO staff we worked with. As we considered the efficacy of the HCSO program we also came to understand that this program has evolved notably over time, and as a result, has been a different program during the different years of implementation. We were also able to observe in the data that the program largely disappeared for a few years before reemerging with the Second Chance Act in 2011. COVID and sharply falling rates of incarceration have also undoubtedly both affected program implementation. Ideas about what step-down should be may evolve and change over time; being open to improvements can be beneficial from the programmatic side, but stability in services can be advantageous from a program evaluation perspective. In either case, documentation over time is key.

- *Which community providers and social service agencies would you partner with to develop reentry services and transitional support for clients?*

While some services and programming may be in-house, the success of such programs typically depends on community and public agency partners.

- *Where will the money for step-down come from, and can that funding stream be sustained over time?*

As shown in Table 6, a significant portion of step-down program funding is from sources outside of the sheriff’s office. As the long-term success of step-down programming is largely dependent on the continuity and stability of services, it is important to ensure that funding sources are available year-to-year to avoid disruption. Setting aside resources for the step-down program in state or local budgets, for example, may be a more sustainable practice than seeking grant funding.

- *How will transitioning to the step-down program impact opportunities, incentives, and overall time served for program participants?*

A key component of developing a new step-down program involves a rigorous analysis to align and track details at every level of programming. How do security classifications shift during step-down? What are the work opportunities at step-down? What are the available good time opportunities? In theory, step-down could end up costing the state more money if it is not offering as much “good time” (or sentence-reduction credits) as DOC, so it is crucial to determine what programming will look like. We would also not recommend creating a step-down program for cost-cutting purposes, which could undermine potential benefits to participants.

- *Who might benefit most from step-down program participation?*

Given some of the feedback we heard from participants, it is worth considering that some people might benefit from step-down and others might be disadvantaged in some way—encountering fewer chances to earn money that would be helpful during release, experiencing less helpful or fewer programming options, or missing out on an opportunity only available at DOC that was perceived to be beneficial. Policies that shift people from one system to another may end up benefitting some at the expense of others. Any state that wishes to adopt or expand step-down should be ready to grapple with these program complexities.

Given these considerations, how should policymakers move forward? We created several tools during this project to guide decision-making around stepdown, including:

- 1) *A “how to” guide for step-down implementation.* Due to HCSO’s generous decision to open their doors to this program evaluation, and the invaluable information they provided through ongoing meetings, phone calls, and emails, we were able to develop a strong understanding of the step-down program, both retrospectively and currently. This information gives information on the detail and complexity needed to design a good step-down program that we have not seen produced elsewhere. (Appendix A)
- 2) *A customizable online cost tool* for policymakers interested in adopting a step-down program in their jurisdiction. Our review of reentry cost benefit analyses indicates even small program effects can create cost-beneficial policy outcomes, and we hope to give policymakers a much better idea of the associated costs of setting up a program through this tool.

Throughout this discussion section, we spend a great deal of time belaboring possible implementation challenges with designing a new step-down program. This is not because we feel negatively about step-down, but because our research suggests that for step-down to work, these programs must meet very specific, and important, assumptions. In other words, step-down programming is only beneficial if implemented carefully and well. Yet crucially, if these assumptions can be met, there is enormous potential to reduce recidivism, improve reintegration outcomes, and provide opportunities for returning citizens to contribute to their communities.

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## Appendix A. Things to Consider when Developing a Step-Down Program

# Things to Consider when Developing a Step-Down Program

The following recommendations are based on learnings from a multi-year process evaluation of a step-down program run in Hampden County, MA. It incorporates the insights of the Sheriff's department research director and her team, care and program coordinators, and present-day step-down participants.

### 1 Classification

State and county systems often have different classification criteria, and individuals incarcerated in a DOC minimum security state facility may be reclassified at a higher level of security at the county level.



#### State considerations:

When determining which individuals to step-down, it is important to consider how they will be classified at the new facility, and whether a potential reclassification could result in fewer opportunities for programming, work, and visitation.



#### County considerations:

Relatedly, once an individual is relocated to a step-down facility, it is important to establish clear expectations and timelines for graduating to lower security classification levels.

### 2 Good Time

An individual's ability to shorten their sentence is largely dependent on the availability of programs that enable them to earn "Good Time." Stepping-down an individual from an environment where they can maximize their good time earnings, to one where they can-

not, may be counterproductive. It is important to compare the availability of "Good Time" at the state facility and the step-down facility.

### 3 Availability of Work and Wages

Relatedly, the availability of work, and the amount of wages available to be earned, can vary between state and local facilities. Amassing savings that can be used for the cost of future housing, transportation, and basic needs is important to successful reentry. If an individual already has a steady, well-paying work-release assignment at a state facility, it is important to ensure that they will have similar opportunities at the step-down facility, and that there will be few delays getting them approved to begin this work.

Establishing strong connections with community partners who may be willing to hire this population, developing job readiness programming, and creating the infrastructure for work-release (e.g. monitoring bracelets), are all important steps in developing a step-down program. It is also prudent for community liaisons to develop an understanding of whether Work Opportunity Tax Credits, or other incentives, are available to employers who hire work-release participants. Depending on the needs of the local economy, it could also be beneficial to provide specialty job training (e.g. forestry, culinary) and job certifications (Servsafe, HVAC, CMRT).

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#### 4 Visitation and Connectivity

An important part of the “closer to home” model is making it easier for individuals to re-connect with family, friends, and support systems. As such, it is important to consider how visitation rights differ at the state and county level. Moving an individual from a state facility that allows contact visits to a local facility that does not may hamper the ability to strengthen bonds with family and friends, especially if the individual has children who may have become accustomed to contact visitation. Similarly, step-down participants should not lose access to other means of staying connected (e.g. electronic tablets) that are available to them at state facilities.

#### 5 Decarceration

Many jurisdictions are committed to diverting larger numbers of justice-involved individuals away from prison/jails and toward community based organizations and support. When developing a step-down system, it is important to consider how efforts to decarcerate might impact the availability of programs specifically tailored for the step-down participant. For example, a precipitous drop in jail residents, and associated funding cuts, might require the consolidation, or elimination of programming. In the event of consolidation, it is important to acknowledge that the needs of state incarcerated populations nearing the end of their sentences can be much different from the needs of those incarcerated at the county level and serving short sentences. Future plans for decarceration should be kept in mind when developing a step-down program.

#### 6 Repeat Programming

State facilities may offer a suite of programming similar to the programming offered at a local facility. If an individual has already graduated from a program (e.g. for treatment

or substance use disorder) requirements to repeat this programming can be frustrating.

#### 7 Facilities, Protocols, and Personal Effects

Recent research suggests that prison architecture and environment impact wellbeing in important ways.<sup>1</sup> It is important to consider the role that facility architecture, policies, and protocols play in this process. Housing step-down participants in facilities where they have access to private or semi-private rooms and bathrooms, and allowing them access to personal effects (e.g. clothing, toiletries) is an important part of catalyzing positive identity formation and independence. Additionally, small changes in processes (e.g. advising COs and Staff to refer to individuals as “residents” rather than inmates) can impact an individual’s self-esteem.

#### 8 All Inclusive Support Services

Hampden County is unique in its commitment to providing wrap-around support services to people exiting their facilities. This includes helping individuals establish a relationship with a primary care physician prior to release, helping newly released individuals sign up for state-subsidized benefits, and providing avenues to continue behavioral or substance use treatment after incarceration. The most successful step-down program will provide a continuum of care and will help participants establish relationships with community partners who can provide support as the reentry journey continues post-release.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Engstrom, K. V., & van Ginneken, E. F. J. C. (2022). Ethical Prison Architecture: A Systematic Literature Review of Prison Design Features Related to Wellbeing. *Space and Culture*, 25(3), 479-503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/12063312221104211>

## Appendix B. Cost Estimates Excluding Statutorily Required Programs

It possible that many jails will have statutorily required programming already in place and can therefore integrate step-down participants into this programming at a lower cost than those who must build this suite of programming specifically for step-down participants. Below is an updated estimate that excludes statutorily required programs. It is evident from the table below that removing these programs has a relatively small impact on overall costs. Whereas our earlier cost estimate of providing not essential and recommended services was \$2,589,469, the updated estimate below is only about \$300,000 less.

We encourage jurisdictions looking to develop a more bespoke suite of programming to [visit our interactive online tool](#), where they estimate the cost of providing only the services they do not already provide.

	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Recommended</b>	<b>Total</b>
Community Reinvestments	Cost data not available	Cost data not available	Cost data not available
Educational and Vocational	\$447,845	\$1,531,723	\$1,979,569
Treatment	\$113,275	\$131,944	\$245,220
Religious/Spiritual	\$7,035	\$21,176	\$28,210
Support/Mentorship	\$8,013	\$33,354	\$41,367
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$576,168</b>	<b>\$1,718,198</b>	<b>\$2,294,366</b>