



How Behavioral Science Is Serving the American People

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Summary: Today, the White House hosted the first-ever Summit on Behavioral Science Insights.



President Barack Obama hugs Kemba Smith during a greet with formerly incarcerated individuals who have received commutations, in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, March 30, 2016. Following that meeting the President took the group to lunch at a local restaurant. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

A year ago, President Obama [issued an Executive Order](#) directing Federal agencies to apply *behavioral science insights*—research insights about how people make decisions and act on them—to the design of Federal policies and programs to better serve the American people.

So, how is behavioral science helping make the government more effective?

J.D. Wheeler III shared a powerful example. He returned home from prison this year, undergoing a transition that is often filled with great challenges—from obtaining health insurance, to finding housing and employment, to building and rebuilding personal relationships.

Over 2.2 million individuals are in American prisons and jails, and the vast majority of them will return to their communities. Improving education and job opportunities has a [recognized effect of reducing crime](#), making our communities safer and reducing barriers to success.

To support people like J.D., this past year the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) developed a “re-entry handbook.” The [Social and Behavioral Sciences Team](#) (SBST)—a cross-agency group of applied behavioral scientists, program officials, and policy makers—contributed to the content and structure of this report using research insights about the best ways of presenting information to people in order to inspire action.

For example, SBST and BOP developed checklists of discrete steps that individuals can take at three distinct points in time: immediately before release, within one week of returning home, and within one month of returning home. Providing individuals who are re-entering society with the proper timing and sequencing of steps is helpful for preventing setbacks—for example, obtaining a birth certificate prior to release can accelerate applying for work upon release. SBST also recommended that individuals be addressed as “members of their community,” and provided ideas for how to de-stigmatize subjects such as mental health.

After using the handbook, J.D. shared that:

"I did 12 years and two months in prison. Before getting my re-entry handbook, it felt like I was in the Flintstone era. With the handbook, though, it rocketed me into the Jetsons' era. I found that I was able to adapt to this entirely new world—especially given all of the new technology—with more awareness and insights into what I needed to do to become a member of my society.

I was removed from the world for so long, I thought my transition was going to move at a snail's pace. But the handbook's structure helped move things along at a moderate pace. Every inmate should get a copy of this handbook at least 30-45 days before they leave prison so they can already know what is going on, what to expect, and have time to really dig in and understand what steps they can take before and after release. I am an ambitious person and I

want something out of my life, and the handbook gave me the knowledge I needed."

JD's story demonstrates why this work matters, both for him and for the broader community. Designing government programs with people in mind can help to ensure that those programs meet people's needs, and serve their broader societal goals.

To learn more about this collaboration, and the more than 40 collaborations SBST has had with Federal agencies from the past year, read [here](#). And watch the Summit below.

READ THE REPORT

White House Summit on Behavioral Science Insights



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