

CURRENT STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING RECIDIVISM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recidivism is the relapse into criminal activity and is generally measured by a former prisoner's return to prison for a new offense. Rates of recidivism reflect the degree to which released inmates have been rehabilitated and the role correctional programs play in reintegrating prisoners into society. The rate of recidivism in the U.S. is estimated to be about two-thirds, which means that two-thirds of released inmates will be re-incarcerated within three years. High rates of recidivism result in tremendous costs both in terms of public safety and in tax dollars spent to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate re-offenders. High rates of recidivism also lead to devastating social costs to the communities and families of offenders, as well as the personal costs to the offenders themselves. Due to these severe costs, programs for inmates and released inmates that reduce recidivism can be cost effective—even those that have modest rates of success.

In December 2003, the Developing Justice Coalition requested that the Center for Impact Research (CIR) conduct a study to identify the five states that have been the most successful in reducing rates of recidivism and the programs that have contributed to the state's success. CIR's research finds that states vary widely on their formula for determining rates of recidivism. Furthermore, data from program evaluations and measures of the impact of programs on recidivism are uneven in scope and quality.

These limitations in data on recidivism and program evaluation make it impossible to directly compare states and specific programs for their effects on recidivism. Therefore, CIR adopted an approach that reviewed published data and evaluations on programs for inmates and released inmates throughout the U.S. Thus, this study examines program components that were cited by multiple programs and states as being effective in reducing recidivism.

The three components for programs in prison and for aftercare programs in the community that are most frequently cited as key to reducing recidivism include:

- Substance abuse treatment
- Education
- Employment services

Substance abuse is a widespread problem among the prison population, with re-addiction after release a frequent cause of recidivism and a barrier to obtaining stable employment. The report specifically examines the role of drug courts and mandatory treatment, which are associated with a 31 percent reduction in recidivism. It also discusses the new Sheridan Correctional Facility in Illinois, which is a promising and robust model of not only substance abuse treatment in prison but also continued treatment and intensive case management and parole supervision for released inmates.

Educational programs address the needs of released prisoners to attain the skills to find and retain employment and typically include secondary, GED, higher education, and vocational training. Education is reported to reduce recidivism by 29 percent with the completion of high school education found to be the most pervasive need.

Employment services programs address the need of released inmates to find work and typically include job preparedness, career development skills, and job placement. The report specifically discusses New York's Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together program (ComALERT) as an example, which reports recidivism rates of 17 percent compared to 41 percent for those who do not participate in the program.

The report also examines programs that involve multiple components and are used to varying degrees in many jurisdictions. Faith-based programs provide prison chaplain services to entire prisons run by faith organizations. Some faith programs report reducing recidivism by as much as 50 to 60 percent. The potential of parole-based programs is significant because of the large number of people on parole and their unique opportunity to assist released inmates as they are transitioning back into society. Increased accountability within parole programs has been estimated to reduce recidivism by 10 to 20 percent.

Successful programs need to address the fact that inmates and former offenders are a diverse population, and a large proportion face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency—low levels of education, lack of employment experience, physical and mental health problems, and lack of stable housing. Therefore, solutions to the problem of recidivism must be multifaceted. For example, addressing employment issues will not be effective if substance abuse problems remain untreated.

Thus, a range of programs inside and outside prison are necessary to prepare inmates for release, to make referrals and provide services when they return to the community, and to support them in their efforts to find and retain employment and attain self-sufficiency. This coordinated approach geared toward building and supporting self-sufficiency is necessary for reducing the likelihood of former offenders becoming involved in criminal activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the measurement of recidivism may lack clarity, it is clear that high rates of recidivism jeopardize public safety and escalate expenditures on law enforcement and criminal justice. Growing prison populations and high recidivism rates result in enormous individual, social, and economic costs. Prisons are increasingly being expected not only to house offenders, but also to contribute to transforming them into law-abiding citizens. These expectations lead to many different approaches that have the potential to transform prisons. The report outlines three major elements of programs that successfully reduce recidivism: treatment for substance abuse or mental illness can help remove barriers that prevent employment and integration; education provides the skills necessary for inmates to obtain the types of jobs that lead to more successful outcomes; and employment provides released inmates an income as well as supporting integration by increasing stability and self-confidence. Below are some general and specific recommendations.

Accountability

- Evaluate programs and replicate those that are successful and cost-effective.

Careful evaluation of programs is necessary to identify those that merit replication. For example, if the outcomes of the new Sheridan Correction Center are positive, Illinois should consider modeling other programs on Sheridan's comprehensive approach to rehabilitation. The Sheridan model encompasses the other recommendations outlined below, combining treatment with education and employment programs for inmates and improved parole supervision that is coordinated with community-based re-entry services.

- Increase accountability of prison and parole personnel for rehabilitation and recidivism.

Accountability is a current approach to increasing the effectiveness of government expenditure on programs, most notably in the "No Child Left Behind" national education policy. When people in charge of prison and parole programs are held accountable for specific outcomes, it increases the effort directed toward achieving them. For example, increasing parole accountability has been shown to decrease recidivism by 10 to 20 percent.

Rehabilitative Services for Inmates

- Conduct universal screening and assessment of inmates for mental illness and substance abuse.

Rates of substance abuse and mental illness are much higher among inmates than in the general population; prison intake procedures need to identify and refer individuals in need of substance abuse or mental health treatment.

- Increase the availability of effective substance abuse treatment and mental health treatment for inmates.

Treatment in prison has been shown to be cost effective, yet participation of inmates in treatment programs has decreased in recent years from 25 percent in 1991 to about 10 percent in 1997. This is compared to an estimated 70 to 85 percent of inmates who are believed to need substance abuse treatment. An estimated 40 percent of mentally ill inmates do not receive treatment.

- Make educational and vocational programs more accessible to inmates by increasing capacity and removing barriers and restrictions to enrollment.

Given the low levels of educational attainment among prisoners, the need for educational and vocational programs is high. However, access and availability are limited. Increasing enrollment in these programs would improve the employability of participants upon release.

Addressing the Needs of Released Inmates

- Identify prisoners at higher risk for recidivating and develop an appropriate service plan for them.

Any effort to reduce recidivism must recognize that the diversity of the prison population requires solutions that can address a myriad of inmate needs. No single program can reduce recidivism significantly because many different factors affect it. Released inmates encounter a range of common problems that contribute to returning to criminal behaviors.

- Provide effective and intensive parole supervision, case management, and monitoring after release.

Offenders often face multiple problems and challenges upon release—finding a place to live and a job, staying drug free, reuniting with family members, and rebuilding one’s life. Efforts to reduce recidivism require attention to the specific and changing circumstances of former offenders and need to provide access to services that can address them. The recent Illinois initiative, Operation Spotlight, promises to bring much-needed attention and resources to the area of parole supervision.

- Provide linkages to treatment programs outside of prison for released inmates.

The need for treatment for substance abuse and mental illness continues after an inmate leaves prison. Released inmates with substance abuse problems are at risk for re-addiction, which in turn increases the likelihood of involvement in criminal activity and parole violations. Effective linkages to treatment programs outside of prison are vital to the successful re-entry of prisoners. The Sheridan program incorporates this approach through its involvement of TASC clinical case management

- Coordinate parole with substance abuse and mental health treatment.

Better coordination of parole with substance abuse and mental health treatment would improve access and increase treatment options for technical parole violations, which are important since many violations are related to substance abuse and can result in return to prison.

DEVELOPING JUSTICE COALITION

The overarching goal of the Developing Justice Coalition is to provide a platform that educates and empowers residents and local clergy to take leadership roles in addressing the current policies in the administration of justice in Illinois. These local leaders work in partnership with politicians, public officials, and other community leaders to dismantle discriminatory policy and to develop new policy that helps to sustain and promote healthy urban communities.

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CENTER FOR IMPACT RESEARCH

Founded in 1975, the Center for Impact Research (CIR) focuses its work on issues of economic and social justice. CIR uses community-based research to advocate for and achieve changes in public policy and programs. The Center works collaboratively with diverse partners, who are all striving to eliminate the fundamental causes of poverty and injustice. CIR is focusing its current work in four project areas: Working Families; Children and Adolescents; Seniors; and Alternatives to Incarceration.

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