

Rehabilitate or Recycle? Growing Public Expectations

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Authors' Note: This article was excerpted in large part from a longer manuscript available at www.mtcinstitute.com/publications/RP-ProgramsThatReduceRecidivism.pdf.

The American public is growing increasingly impatient with correctional systems that are unable to significantly reduce the alarming rate at which offenders are released into their communities ill prepared to constructively engage in employment and socially positive behavior.

The dilemma is that, although crime rates are down, incarceration rates have risen at a dramatic rate, and the largest increase in the nation's prisons are "recycled" offenders who have committed new crimes within three years of their release.

This increase in reincarceration is occurring in the face of growing evidence that investments in education, training and drug treatment programs within prisons have the potential to significantly impact recidivism. Effective programs have demonstrated as much as a 40 percent reduction in recidivism (Brown, 2000). While many programs are important, the research is unequivocal in noting that hard-core drug treatment programs and credential-based education and training programs dramatically reduce the rate of recidivism. This is not surprising considering 71 percent of incarcerated offenders in 15 of the largest urban counties are serving time on a felony drug conviction, and 41 percent of all state and federal inmates are lacking a high school diploma or GED (Harlow, 2003).

Contrary to the perception of the general public, at least 95 percent of state offenders are released from prison (BJS, 2003). Offenders spend an average of 28.9 months in prison prior to first release (BJS, 2002) and re-enter communities where there is a growing demand for skilled and educated workers. For the past few years and in the foreseeable future, the economy is creating more skilled jobs than can be filled with available workers.

The public is growing increasingly aware that modest targeted investments in firmly structured education and drug treatment programs in prisons will have positive personal impacts on the offender, significantly reduce crime in communities, and save millions of dollars in taxes, policing and reincarceration costs. A study conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy found that even modest reductions in recidivism can yield "an attractive economic bottom line" (Aos et al., 1999).

This article points to the clear and urgent public policy implication that arises from the available evidence. The most meaningful, long-range measure of any prison's real effectiveness is — and ought to be — success in reducing the number of inmates who end up back in prison once they are released. As it is, the nation's correctional system has basically become a revolving door for recycling criminal behavior, and these recycled offenders are now a large percentage — 52 percent — of the prison population (Langan and Levin, 2002).

Current Conditions

Recidivists are committing additional crimes in neighborhoods and the taxpayers end up paying again for new

crimes when elected officials could be focusing limited resources on program investments, avoiding the attendant recidivist-related economic burdens.

With the increasing number of offenders returning to prison, conventional systems must broaden their mission, protecting the public not only through a safe and secure prison system, but also by providing appropriate programming. This will enable offenders to return to society as responsible, educated, skilled, tax-paying individuals.

Funding effective programs in prison can result in the avoidance of future costs associated with recidivism. Research makes abundantly clear that education and drug treatment programs pay for themselves and reduce future costs when properly designed and implemented. On average, every dollar spent on human service-oriented programming in criminal justice saves the taxpayer \$5 and the victim \$7 (Aos et al., 1999).

Releasing offenders to their families, communities and the work force ready to participate as productive citizens is a long-term investment strategy that will pay meaningful dividends.

Recidivism has become the dominant factor of the U.S. penal system. In 1997, more than two out of three inmates (67.5 percent) released in 1994 were rearrested within three years for a felony or serious misdemeanor, up from 62.5 percent in 1983 (Langan and Levin, 2002). In 1983, 41.4 percent of those rearrested went back to prison; in 1994, the number was more than one-half (51.8 percent). During the 1990s, the number of parole violators who were returned to prison grew by 54 percent, compared with a 7 percent growth in the number arrested for new crimes (Harrison and Karberg, 2003).

Recidivists are also committing more crimes. A study that followed 272,111 state inmates released in 1994 for three years found that 183,675 ex-offenders were charged with an average of four new crimes each (Langan and Levin, 2002).

Time in prison should be well spent. In this light, and considering the potential for a 25 percent to 30 percent reduction in recidivism from properly designed and implemented programs, policy decisions that trim programming dollars from prison budgets that support education programs and drug rehabilitation are fiscally irresponsible.¹

In the past 10 years, the American economy has created more than 16 million new jobs (Employment Policy Foundation, 2002). Employment opportunities increased most dramatically for those with training beyond high school, including vocational and technical training, but employment for those with only a high school diploma still increased by 131,000 jobs between 1992 and 2002. For those with less than a high school diploma, there were half a million fewer jobs available.

But that is just the beginning. The Labor Department projects that the American economy will need more than 118 million new workers by 2031 to replace retirees and fill new job slots (Employment Policy Foundation, 2001). By 2012, the nation will suffer a labor shortage of more than 6 million workers (Employment Policy Foundation, 2002). It is further anticipated that even low-skilled jobs

Continued on page 28

Diversion Program for Maryland Drug Abusers is Proposed

Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is seeking to change the way the state's justice system handles substance abuse by making it easier for some drug offenders to get treatment instead of jail time. Ehrlich is asking the General Assembly to pass legislation establishing guidelines for prosecutors who want to keep nonviolent drug offenders out of jail or off probation.

While the first phase of the program would be limited, Ehrlich said he hopes diversion would be the first step toward revamping the state's attitude toward drug abuse. "Twenty-five years ago, this would be a lot more difficult to do," he said. "But attitudes about the war on drugs are changing."

Under the program, prosecutors would be able to evaluate offenders to determine whether they can be treated successfully for drug abuse. Once candidates are identified, they would be referred to the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which would then assign them to a drug treatment facility. The program would also be open to inmates seeking parole.

The prosecutor, who would be able to monitor an offender's progress, would then place the defendant's criminal charge on an inactive docket so it could be expunged after three years. "It gives the individual a chance to engage in treatment and come back from treatment and not get slammed for it" when trying to get a job, said Alan Woods, director of the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention. The governor has included about \$8 million in his budget, about half of which would pay for treatment slots for 98 adults and 310 juveniles to start the program.

Source: The Washington Post

Prisons Improve Economy in Berlin, N.H.

Many residents of Berlin, N.H., a city that has long relied on paper mills for its economic lifeblood, believe that its future now lies in its prisons since the troubled mills suffered a shutdown in 2001. The city is already home to the \$30 million, medium-security Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility that opened more than three years ago.

Now, most of the Coos County community is embracing the construction of a new \$154.5 million federal correctional facility scheduled to open in 2008. The actual site for the Berlin medium-security federal prison, which will be second only to the Seabrook nuclear power plant as the state's most ambitious public works project, has not been determined. But one possible location is near the current 500-bed state prison with its 217 positions.

In a county with the highest unemployment rate in the state, the infusion of 300 more jobs from the second prison means many residents will no longer have to leave home to find work. And those who move here — about 40 percent of the new hires are expected to arrive from outside Coos County — could help revitalize an aging community. In Berlin alone, more than 9 percent of families are considered living below the poverty level.

Berlin Mayor Bob Danderson, who lobbied for the federal prison, acknowledged that the new facility is not a cure for all the city's problems. But he does think it will help provide careers for younger people and bolster the local economy with newcomers. "One of our biggest problems in Berlin is the excess of housing," Danderson said. "One of the things [the influx] will do is raise the value of existing properties and create a market for new properties."

Source: The Boston Globe

— Vanessa St. Gerard

Rehabilitate or Recycle? Growing Expectations

Continued from page 6

(e.g., equipment operators, assembly line workers, manual service workers) will remain at about 23 percent of the total jobs needed for the foreseeable future (Employment Policy Foundation, 2001). In this kind of labor market, every individual is needed for the workplace — ex-offenders included. In the end, it is not so much that the nation cannot afford the growing cost of recidivism; it is that the economy cannot afford to sustain the cost of a shortage of workers.

Education works. A basic fact of life in a fast-paced global economy dominated by new technologies is that education remains the single best predictor for successful employment, lifetime income, standard of living, personal achievement, further education and keeping people out of jail. In such an environment, education is one of the most effective forms of crime prevention. Evidence for this assertion is abundant and growing.

Results from a recent three-state study conducted by the Correctional Education Association on the impact of education on recidivism in Maryland, Ohio and Minnesota are particularly compelling. Aggregating the recidivism

rates for 3,099 inmates in all three states, the study showed that prison education programs reduce recidivism. Some 57 percent of nonparticipants in education programs were rearrested compared with 48 percent of participants; 35 percent of nonparticipants were re-convicted compared with 27 percent of participants; and 31 percent of nonparticipants were reincarcerated compared with 21 percent of participants. In the same study, researchers found that, on average, correctional education participants out-earned nonparticipants over one-, two- and three-year post-release periods by 30 percent, 10 percent and 11 percent, respectively (Steurer and Smith, 2003).

The National Institute of Literacy reported that correctional education programs reduced the probability of reincarceration by 29 percent; additionally, inmates who participated in apprenticeships or vocational training were 33 percent less likely to be reincarcerated over the long-term (Tolbert, 2002). This study supports previous research that has been completed.

Even though prison-based educational programs have been shown to correlate positively with higher wages, increased family stability, higher work force participation and reduced cost to correctional systems, prisons do not seem to do particularly well, quantitatively, at delivering

the educational foundations needed for further educational or employment success. For example, 59 percent of adult inmates are either illiterate or functionally illiterate and, between 1991 and 1997, participation in educational programming in both state and federal prison systems declined. In 1997, there was a 44 percent increase in state prison inmates entering prison without a high school diploma when compared with those entering in 1991. Further, 66.7 percent of state and federal prison inmates in 1997 had attained less than a high school diploma, and more than one-third of all prison inmates (38.7 percent) had not received a high school diploma or GED (compared with 18.4 percent of the general population) (Harlow, 2003).

Drug rehabilitation works. Reports on substance abuse treatment and prevention programs convincingly demonstrate that it is possible to break the cycle of criminal behavior, reduce recidivism and save tax dollars.

A review of the effectiveness of 12 correctional program areas offered by the Washington Department of Corrections indicated that programs for chemically dependent offenders in the form of in-prison therapeutic communities with follow-up community treatment worked to reduce recidivism (MacKenzie and Hickman, 1998). Furthermore, preliminary results from a five-year study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse of the Amity program at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in California saw a one-year recidivism rate of 25 percent for participants who were involved in the in-prison therapeutic community and aftercare component, compared with 67 percent for a nontreated comparison group of inmates (Hiller, Knight and Simpson, 1999).

Treatment programs are well worth the investment. According to a 2003 report from the Little Hoover Commission, when managed well, alcohol and drug treatment can save \$7 in incarceration costs for every \$1 spent, with gains attributable to reduced crime, enhanced workplace productivity and lower health care costs. Based on an average treatment cost of \$6,500 per inmate, and assuming training for only 10 percent of today's inmates who are drug and alcohol abusers, the first-year savings would be in excess of \$8.26 billion (Marks, 2003).

Principles of Effective Correctional Programming

Correctional environments are dynamic and challenging for offenders and staff. Therefore, program designs must provide the impetus for change within the offender. Research has demonstrated that education and drug treatment programs have significant payoffs in relation to the investment; however, they reduce future costs only in certain situations. Correctional institutions looking to establish programs that will result in recidivism reductions by at least 25 percent to 30 percent should focus on the principles of education and substance abuse treatment, described in this section, that have been shown to lead to optimal results.

Through extensive review, Correctional Service Canada identified "principles of effective correctional programming" that apply to both education and drug treatment programs. Many of these same elements were also identified in previous research (Cullen, 2002; Glick, 2003; Lawrence et al., 2002; MacKenzie, 1997; Tolbert, 2002). From these and other sources, Correctional Service Canada concluded that the "consensus reached is that

effective (appropriate) programs are behavioral/highly structured in nature and target the criminogenic attitudes, values and behaviors of higher-risk offenders. Inappropriate or ineffective programs tend to be those that are psychodynamic, nondirective, medical model, use vague group milieu/vocational/educational strategies or sanctions, or any treatment that does not target criminogenic needs" (Correctional Service Canada, 2003).

Effective educational program principles. Educational programming typically encompasses adult basic education, general educational development, vocational education/training and life skills. The impact of an educational program for a particular offender may be influenced by the offender's educational level when beginning the program, along with the duration of participation. Exposure to educational programs must be extensive enough for individuals to earn diplomas and certificates from their respective schools; the higher the level of education attainment, the greater the degree of success (Kelso, 2000).

In order for credential-based education and training programs to reach their potential, the culture of the institution needs to be highly supportive of the programs, adhering to outcome-focused principles. Administrators and institutional staff must embrace the result-focused environment and commit to a formal time schedule and related processes. This means that offenders would remain in programs, except for health or security reasons. Meetings with staff or other situations would need to occur during nonprogram periods.

Education pays off, but only if it is highly outcome focused for a specific duration of time, with sufficient continuity, and has certain qualitative standards. Those principles found in the research that are demonstrative of effective intervention as applied to correctional educational programs include the following:

- Formal education must be focused on specific outcomes, including GEDs and vocational certificates;
- Formal education programs must be of appropriate duration and continuity;
- Educators and curriculum must be certified; and
- Formal assessment of the offender must be conducted upon arrival.

Effective substance abuse treatment program principles. Substance abusers bring a unique set of constraints and program needs. Treatment programs show the best results when adhering to a continuum-of-care model from institution to community with high quality programs and services (Hiller et al., 1999). Success is also impacted by the program structure, intensity, assessment, treatment focus and continuity, as well as the length of time offenders spent in the program.

While the specific treatment method may vary, there are five common principles (Glick, 2003; Harrison and Martin, 2003; Hiller et al., 1999; Office of National Drug Control Policy, 1998; Open Society Institute, 1997). They are:

- Treatment programming is highly structured and intensive;
- Treatment has a cognitive focus;
- Offender assessment guides programming type and intensity;
- Structured substance abuse treatment programs must be of appropriate duration and continuity; and
- The program includes an aftercare component.

Conclusion

Investments in prison education and substance abuse treatment can provide a 25 percent to 30 percent reduction in recidivism from properly designed and implemented programs. In order for these kinds of programs to achieve maximum outcomes, there must be funding and an institutional culture highly supportive of the principles of hard-core outcome-focused programs.

Lowering recidivism is like taking on self-retiring debt. Education and substance abuse programs quickly pay for themselves in lower costs of community policing, prosecution and incarceration. For inmates and society alike, it is a win-win proposition.

In fact, the point for public policy is that by allocating the funds for educational and substance abuse programs now, taxpayers can sidestep the massive, certain and continuing costs of recidivism later. The research is showing the public that these programs can work and they should expect a better return on prison investments. Rather than just locking up offenders, elected officials are in a position to make the correctional system one that reforms and rehabilitates rather than recycles.

ENDNOTES

¹ After a review of 13 quantitative reviews of the literature, representing a minimum of 700 studies in all, Correctional Service Canada (2003) found that involvement in prison programming resulted in an average reduction in recidivism of about 10 percent. After further analysis of specific program characteristics, however, it concluded that "[e]ffective (appropriate) programs are behavioral/highly structured in nature and target the criminogenic attitudes, values and behaviors of higher-risk offenders." Participation in appropriate programs led to an average reduction of 25 percent to 30 percent in recidivism.

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