

Research in Review

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Special Issue on Inmate Reentry

The incarceration rate in the United States has grown steadily over the past 20 years. As of 1996, the national incarceration rate was 427 inmates per 100,000 population, up from 139 in 1980. In 1999 approximately 3.1 percent of the population, or 6.3 million people were in incarcerated or on parole/probation according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The vast majority of inmates currently incarcerated will be released at some point. In 1998 alone, a total of 626,973 inmates were released from custody across the nation. Many released offenders will return to the correctional system.

Recidivism has long been a key issue in criminal rehabilitation and is a common measure of the success or failure of correctional programs. Although multiple definitions of recidivism are in use across jurisdictions, recidivism is generally defined as a relapse back into criminal behavior. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections defines recidivism as the percentage of released inmates who are returned to our prison system for any reason (e.g. new crime, parole violation, etc). Our benchmark period for tracking inmates is three years from their release from prison. In Pennsylvania, the three year recidivism rate for inmates released from state prison in 1996 was 39.2 percent. National recidivism rates reported in *The Corrections Yearbook - 1999* vary from 11 percent in Montana to 67 percent in Utah (both at three years out).

While recidivism rates vary across jurisdictions, and though no universal definition or measure of recidivism exists, recidivism is clearly a concern for most states. The issue of inmate *reentry* into society has been placed at the forefront of the criminal justice community. Unfortunately, much of the literature on the topic is dedicated to identifying barriers to successful reentry, while little time is spent examining factors that promote successful reintegration into the community.

Risk factors for recidivism are commonly divided into two categories: static and dynamic. Static factors are traits that cannot be changed, such as criminal history, past drug addiction and childhood experiences. Dynamic factors are traits that can be changed, such as anti-social attitudes, lack of skills necessary to succeed in society, and poor decision making skills. Dynamic factors are the focus of effective re-entry programs. Reentry programs that closely monitor offenders upon release and that provide ongoing treatment programs to ex-offenders in the community show the highest success rates. This special issue of *Research in Review* examines programs that have had success in facilitating reentry and reducing recidivism.

Summary of Major Findings of Articles Reviewed in this Issue

Michelle Gaseau. 2000. "Making Offender Job Placement Work." *The Corrections Connection News Center*, August, 4 pp. Page 2

The article discusses the increasing trend in helping inmates find jobs and start their lives over upon release. It stresses the importance of giving inmates something positive and constructive to do with their time. The article focuses on elements of successful work and job placement programs, including changing the offender's thinking patterns, offender assessment, pre-employment and job readiness skills, job development, and job placement.

Greg Little, et alii. 1999. "Successful Ten-Year Outcome Data on MRT – Treated Felony Offenders Show Significantly Lower Reincarceration Rates in Each Year." *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment Review and CCI News*, 8(1), 1-2. Page 3

The article tracks ex-offenders who completed a Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) program and compares their recidivism rates to a control group of offenders who did not participate in an MRT program. The study is unique in that it monitors recidivism over a ten year period. The study found that inmates who completed an MRT program have significantly lower recidivism rates than those in the control group.

Jeremy Travis. 2000. "But They All Come Back: Rethinking Prisoner Reentry." *Sentencing and Corrections*, Number 7, 1-9. Page 4

The article opens by discussing the increasing prison population since 1980. It connects this increase in incarceration to the fact that more offenders are being released from prison with little or no post-release supervision. The author proposes several possible approaches to managing reentry.

"Reducing the Threat of Recidivism." *RPI Report: The Newsletter of the Reentry Partnerships Initiative*, Issue 1(July 2000), 1-2. Page 6

The article discusses a program called the Reentry Partnerships Initiative that involves eight states. The program focuses on easing the transition from incarceration to life in the community while ensuring public safety.

Joan Petersilia. 2000. "Challenges of Prisoner Reentry and Parole in California" *CPRC Brief*, 12(3), 4 pp. Page 7

This article discusses various challenges facing parolees in California. The article focuses on two main causes of recidivism: unmet needs within the institution and risk factors prevalent in the outside community.

Detailed Reviews

Michelle Gaseau. 2000. "Making Offender Job Placement Work." <i>The Corrections Connection News Center</i> , August, 4 pp.
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Agencies such as the federal Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (OCJTP) have developed job placement models that educate inmates and firms about the placement of ex-offenders into jobs. There is currently much emphasis on enhancing the skill level of individuals working for

placement services. Individuals who create and maintain offender job placement programs learn the essential elements of making the programs work for both offenders and employers.

Successful placement programs require offenders who are willing and ready to obtain and keep a legitimate job after release, on employers who are willing to give an offender a second chance and on someone to help the offender with related services (e.g. housing). OJCTP and other agencies providing offender job placement discuss several elements of successful programs.

This article suggests that placement programs must focus on several areas in order to prepare offenders for release and re-employment. These areas include: Changing the Offender's Thinking, Offender Assessment, Pre-employment and Job Readiness Skills, Job Development and Job Placement. Placement programs must help offenders move from a criminal mindset to one that is socially acceptable, must prepare them for the rigors of full-time employment and must help them find employment by holding resume writing classes and teaching interview skills. Programs must also ease employers' fears regarding hiring ex-offenders and employment specialists must consider the employer as the client. The article also states that immediacy of employment is key to any program seeking to find work for ex-offenders.

The article discusses a program begun by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections in which inmates interview with potential employers via video conferencing equipment. Approximately two thirds of the inmates are called back for second interviews. The OJCTP is studying job retention rates to determine which training programs are the most effective. Additionally, the OJCTP is adding training for offender job placement specialists.

The article concludes by stating that programs must be about more than simply finding a job. Job placement programs must encourage inmates to change their lives while giving them a level playing field for finding employment. Family and social service agencies are also critical to the success of the reentry process.

Greg Little, et alii. 1999. "Successful Ten-Year Outcome Data on MRT – Treated Felony Offenders Show Significantly Lower Reincarceration Rates in Each Year." *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment Review and CCI News*, 8(1), 1-2.

Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) is a highly structured, cognitive behavioral group approach utilized with offenders, drug abusers, alcoholics, and other groups. Reincarceration data on five separate groups of MRT treated felony offenders at the Shelby County Correction Center in Memphis, Tennessee has been routinely published since 1988. This report extends the post-release reincarceration data on these offenders and appropriate controls for a full ten years. Reincarceration was defined as "a return to prison or a jail for any length of time following a conviction for any new sentence including violation of probation/parole."

MRT was provided to inmates who volunteered to participate in groups twice per week, with control

groups formed from volunteers who were not treated with MRT. From 1987 to the end of 1988, a total of 70 offenders were treated with MRT and released. A total of 82 non-treated offenders were assigned to the control group during the same period. These two groups have now been released for a minimum of ten years. Additional treated and non-treated groups were formed in subsequent years.

The analysis compared inmates who entered treatment with appropriate controls. MRT participants attended an average of 31 group sessions and completed an average of six MRT phases. The groups were matched on race, age, criminal history, drug usage, and other variables. About 80 percent of participants and controls were African-American with the average age being about 25 years. The average sentence was 2.9 years.

The treated group's reincarceration rate is consistently lower than that of the control group. At one year post-release, the treated group's reincarceration rate was two-thirds that of the control group. In all subsequent years, the treated group's reincarceration rate was approximately one-fifth to one-third that of the control group. At ten years post-release, treated subjects had 45.7 percent reincarceration rate, compared to 64.6 percent for the control group.

The study seems to be well designed, however, there is no distinction made between misdemeanor and felony convictions. Length of sentence was used to determine severity of the crime as the researchers wanted to include misdemeanors in the study. Thus, interesting differences in the nature of re-offending between the two groups may be concealed by this design. This limitation notwithstanding, this study does provide useful insight into a program that seems to have caught the attention of treatment professionals in many correctional systems.

Jeremy Travis. 2000. "But They All Come Back: Rethinking Prisoner Reentry." *Sentencing and Corrections*, Number 7, 1-9.

Jeremy Travis, the former Director of the National Institute of Justice, maintains that there is currently no effective means of managing reentry to achieve the goal of inmate reintegration into society. He suggests that parole supervision agencies could conceivably manage many parts of the process, but they cannot realistically extend their reach to the work of correctional institutions, and they rarely play a role at sentencing. Correctional institutions can help prepare offenders for release, but their authority is generally limited to the environment within the prison walls. Parole boards theoretically influence both ends of the continuum, but in reality even they have little capacity to integrate sentencing decisions, prison-based activities, and community-based supervision.

The movement to abolish or severely restrict parole continues to attract support in the political arena. A traditional function of parole boards – deciding release dates for prisoners – has been diminished if not eliminated in many jurisdictions due to mandatory sentencing, restrictions on good time, and truth-in-sentencing laws. For example, more than half of all states require that violent offenders serve at least 85 percent of their sentence before they are eligible for parole. Second, parole boards have traditionally decided whether or not a prisoner is "ready" to be released and have supervised the development of a release plan. The underpinnings of this approach have been weakened by research findings, public outcry, and political attacks from the left and right asserting that

rehabilitation programs are not effective, parole decisions are highly arbitrary, and parole supervision does not reduce recidivism. Finally, public pressure has undermined confidence in the parole system due to the highly visible, sometimes heinous crimes committed by some parolees who might otherwise have been in prison.

Travis discusses programs in Boston, Washington state, and Wisconsin. He notes that these models change reentry strategies in several key ways. Anonymity is replaced with in-your-face contact. The prohibition against consorting with known criminals is replaced with the activism of community justice teams. Organizational boundaries and cultural incompatibility that kept police and probation officers apart are replaced by team building efforts. The work of community corrections can be organized by the neighborhood where the offender lives, the location of the crime problem to be addressed, or the place where the community justice project is located. Finally, the role of the community corrections officer is radically different. It is now that of community outreach worker, jobs and service broker and partner with the police in law enforcement.

Travis also discusses restorative justice, which is a grassroots movement taking place in the criminal justice system. Some aspects are court-based with formal hearings giving way to an alternative dispute resolution process involving the offender, lawyers, and the community in addition to the judge. Some aspects are police-based with officers facilitating family group conferences that involve victims, family members, and the offender. This process is also corrections-based as evidenced by the Reparative Citizen Boards developed by Vermont Department of Corrections head John Gorczyk, where community members interact with offenders to draw up a contract stipulating probation conditions. Finally, the process can be prosecution-based, as shown in the Neighborhood Conference Committees developed under Travis County, Texas, District Attorney Ronald Earle. In this program panels of citizens meet with juvenile offenders and separately with their parents and draw up a contract specifying the conditions of diversion from court. Travis discusses three aspects of restorative justice: reintegrating the offender into the community, impact on the victim, and the process of defining the terms of reentry.

The article is well thought out and has received significant attention by corrections professionals. Travis concludes his discussion with an insightful proposal on how to manage reentry. He proposes creating a “reentry court” where offenders would be sentenced and required to develop a plan, with the assistance of the judge, for their successful reentry into the community. This plan would cover what the inmate is to accomplish in prison and upon his or her release into the community (a sort of expanded Prescriptive Program Plan). While incarcerated, a significant amount of the inmate’s time would be spent preparing for reentry. Upon completion of the sentence a release ceremony would be held in the same courtroom where the offender was sentenced, with the inmate’s family and support team present. The inmate’s progress in the community would be monitored by monthly court appearances. Such a plan recognizes that most offenders will return to the community, and attempts to coordinate and reconcile the activities of the many criminal justice agencies involved in managing this complex and challenging reentry process.

“Reducing the Threat of Recidivism.” *RPI Report: The Newsletter of the Reentry Partnerships Initiative*, Issue 1(July 2000), 1-2.

This article reports on an unfounded initiative currently undertaken by eight jurisdictions across the

country to address the challenges presented by the return of offenders from prison to the community. The Reentry Partnerships Initiative (RPI) is being implemented in Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, South Carolina, Vermont and Washington. The program aims to assist jurisdictions in meeting the challenges to public safety presented by the return of offenders from correctional institutions to the community.

The article states that many offenders lack the skills necessary to remain crime free upon their release to the community, and that nearly two-thirds will return to prison within a three year period of their release. It also states that many local communities lack the resources to track offenders adequately enough to ensure effective risk management and protection for victims. Finally, corrections officials may not have sufficient resources to determine individual support needs, gauge available resources, and match available resources to the identified needs.

The RPI seeks to improve risk management of released offenders by enhancing surveillance, performing risk and needs assessments, and planning for pre-release. The initiative has developed a set of priorities in order to accomplish their goals. The priorities include: accountability to the community and victims, substance abuse and mental health treatment, life skills training, and employment preparation and placement. Success of the program requires partnerships between state and community correctional institutes, local law enforcement, and community based organizations to develop offender reentry plans.

This initiative is one of two underway in the Office of Justice Programs (OJP). The Reentry Courts Initiative evolved from the successful drug court model used throughout the country. This approach draws on the authority of the court to apply sanctions and incentives necessary to increase the likelihood that offenders will become crime free and productive members of the community. The reentry Courts, like the RPI, will draw heavily on partners such as the judiciary, institutional and community corrections, law enforcement agencies, social service agencies, and community organizations.

Both programs seek to mitigate the negative effects of transition from prison to community. This is accomplished by devising strategies that balance surveillance with efforts to reduce recidivism. These programs also seek to provide support services to improve long term individual viability, thereby enhancing public safety.

The article is less a research piece and more an informative overview of two new approaches to reducing recidivism. The programs emphasize making support services available to ex-offenders when they return to the community while placing a high priority on post-release surveillance and monitoring. The impact of these programs should be tracked as they may provide a foundation for effective reentry programs in Pennsylvania. The primary weakness of the article is that it does not address finances, which might be problematic in any attempt to replicate this model on a large scale.

Joan Petersilia. 2000. "Challenges of Prisoner Reentry and Parole in California" *CPRC Brief*, 12(3), 4 pp.

Under California's Determinate Sentencing Law, offenders receive fixed terms when initially sentenced and are released when their prison term ends. As a result of this law, California's inmate

population has grown significantly, quadrupling since 1980. Funding for inmate programs has not been able to meet the treatment needs of this increased population. Barely half of the state's inmates have work assignment or are in programs at any given time, and less than a quarter of all inmates receive education or vocational training while incarcerated. Only 5 percent of approximately 142,000 inmates released from prison in 1998 completed a reentry program.

Many criminal justice policy initiatives fail to consider parole and prisoner reentry within a broader social context, such as the effects on families, significant others, and community vitality. Research has documented how the social organization of neighborhoods, particularly poverty, ethnic composition, and residential stability influence recidivism. As the structure of a community starts to change, disorder and incivilities may increase, out-migration follows and crime and violence increase. Additionally, many inmates find protection and connections in gangs while incarcerated. These loyalties are exported to the community upon release.

The article also explores unemployment, political alienation, physical and mental health and homelessness as causes for recidivism. Unemployment directly influences crime and social pathologies related to violence and substance abuse. Denying large segments of the population the right to vote contributes to greater alienation and disillusionment with the political process, making those feeling disenfranchised less willing to participate in local activities. Moreover, many ex-offenders do not receive the mental health care they need. These individuals are more likely to engage in criminal behaviors. Homelessness increases citizen fear that contributes to increased crime and violence.

Public intolerance of parole failure and improved monitoring systems result in more parolees being returned to prison. This puts pressure on states to build more facilities which in turn compete for money for community-based rehabilitation programs that might have helped parolees while they were on the street. This contributes to a cycle of recidivism.

There are political impediments to overcoming these challenges. The public often resists community-based programs unless they are proven to work, but such programs will not work without sufficient funding. Furthermore, when caseloads increase and services decrease, inmates who are motivated to change have fewer opportunities to do so. This is unfortunate because inmates are most motivated to change when they are first released. Services must be offered at this point, as it is one of the few potential points to successfully intervene in offenders' lives.