



Is Incarceration Still the Answer?

The Impact of Current Policies & Possible Alternatives



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Abstract

The criminal justice system is tasked with protecting the public from crime but Americans are conflicted about the best way to deter criminal behavior, protect the public and provide justice for victims. There are two different intellectual strands which are the foundation of the criminal justice system: one focuses on rehabilitation while the other emphasizes punishment as a means of deterring criminal behavior. The deterrence model has been the most popular in the US. This brief reviews current research which assesses, and generally finds deficient, present criminal justice policies. It also examines the unintended consequences – both budgetary and social – of contemporary incarceration policies. It concludes with a discussion of policy options that could enhance the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, including alternative sentencing for nonviolent offenders and the expanded use of evidence-based community reentry programs.

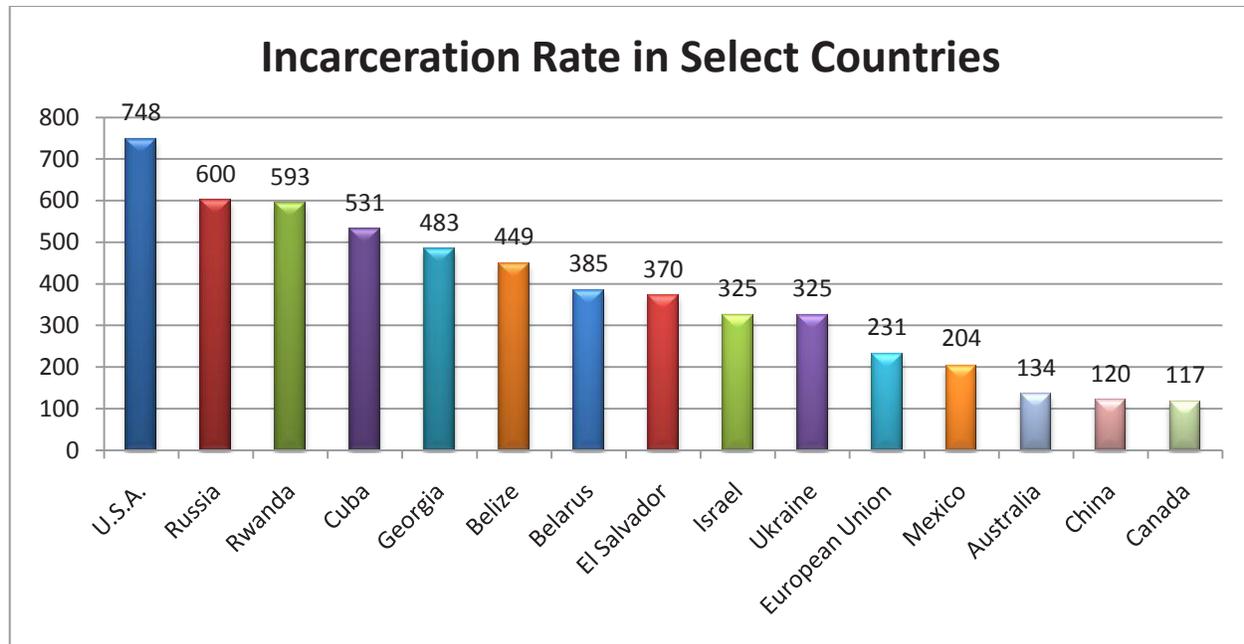
Introduction

The criminal justice system is tasked with protecting the public from crime but Americans are conflicted about the best way to deter criminal behavior, protect the public and provide justice for victims. Some argue that the correctional system must rehabilitate offenders in ways that will equip them for a

life without crime, thereby enabling them to reenter the community successfully. Others argue that these objectives can be met through punishment that is severe enough that it serves as a deterrent both for the offender and for others in the community. The US criminal justice system draws upon both of these philosophical strands but the deterrence model has been popular with policy-makers, especially in the last three decades. This is evidenced by “three-strikes” laws, as well as stiffer penalties for illegal drug use and other drug-related crimes. As a result, the U.S. incarceration rate increased by 338% from 1980 to 2008 (Western and Pettit, 2010).

This report examines the extent to which the U.S. has adopted incarceration as the answer to criminal behavior and highlights research that demonstrates the minimal impact these policies have had on reducing crime. It will also examine the unintended consequences – both budgetary and social – of contemporary incarceration policies. It concludes with a discussion of policy options that could enhance the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. This includes the use of alternative sentencing for many nonviolent offenders and the expanded use of evidence-based community reentry programs. Reducing the number of people being sent to prison benefits more than just state coffers and public safety; reductions

FIGURE 1: INCARCERATION RATES IN SELECT COUNTRIES (PER 100,000 RESIDENTS)



SOURCE: King's College, London (2009). World Prison Brief Online. International Centre for Prison Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/research/icps/worldbrief/>

can also stabilize families and improve the communities that have been most affected by increased incarceration rates over the last 30 years.

Context and Importance

According to the Pew Center on the States, the United States has more people incarcerated than any other country in the world. Even the more populated China has fewer inmates, followed by Russia at a distant third. The rate at which the U.S. is incarcerating people is also far greater than any other country. The U.S. incarcerates about 750 inmates per 100,000 residents, followed by Russia, with a rate of 600 per 100,000, Rwanda and Cuba with rates of 593 and 531, respectively. Incarceration rates for Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and a host of other eastern European countries have rates of 400 or below. (World Prison Brief, 2010). The U.S. rate is eight times that of Germany. Collectively, the European Union comes in at 231 inmates per 100,000 residents.

Nationally, Missouri's incarceration rate is the 17th highest at 715 per 100,000 residents (Pew Center on the States, 2008). However, an even greater number of Missouri residents are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections when you consider those on probation or parole. As of 2007, 1 in 36 Missouri residents was either in prison or on probation or parole (Pew Center on the States, 2009). Nationally, 1 in 31 adults is under some form of correctional control. The rate in urban centers and among minorities is significantly

higher. As many as 1 in 11 blacks are under some form of correctional control in the U.S. Similarly, 1 in 9 black men between the ages of 20 and 34 were actually behind bars in 2008 (Pew Center on the States, 2008), once again the rate being even higher in many of our troubled urban centers.

The incarceration rate that we have today is often described as "mass incarceration" and is the result of policy choices rather than increasing crime rates (Raphael and Stoll 2007). During the '80s and '90s laws were passed that allowed more people to be sentenced to prison, and with mandatory minimum sentencing laws offenders were required to stay longer. The result of these policies is that there are now over 2.3 million people behind bars in the U.S., compared to 200,000 people in 1972 (Rafael and Stoll 2007). One clear example of the overuse of incarceration comes from the "war of drugs" carried out in the U.S. The primary tool of law enforcement in the "war on drugs" has been the expanded use of arrest and incarceration for even the most minor drug offenses. The result of these more punitive drug policies is a tripling of the drug arrests in the last 25 years. In 1980, there were 581,000 drug arrests nationally. By 2005 this had climbed to over 1.8 million, 81.7% of which were for possession offenses (Mauer and King, 2007). Marijuana alone contributed 82% of the increase in drug arrests from 1990-2002, 79% of those arrests were simply marijuana possession. Our current drug laws are just one way we have expanded the use of incarceration, thereby driving our incarceration rate far beyond that of any other country in the world.

As in all policy areas, there is a constant need to reexamine our approaches and determine the effectiveness of our policies as well as their social and financial consequences. If continuing to incarcerate a large number of our citizens resulted in continued decreases in the crime rate, and thus greater benefits to society, then it may be reasonable to maintain our current policies. Therefore, an essential question to ask is whether casting a wider net and increasing the rate of imprisonment actually reduces crime. And if so, does it reduce crime enough to offset the huge financial costs? The following sections will discuss the effect of current policies on crime rates, their financial implications, and the larger social impact on families and communities. Finally, a number of policy alternatives will be offered that could alleviate the strains on our budgets and communities by employing strategies that divert non-violent offenders away from prison.

Relationship Between Incarceration Rates and Crime Rates

Since about 1990, the U.S. crime rate has gradually declined and, at the same time, states and the federal government have enacted increasingly harsh sentencing laws. Many will cite this as sufficient evidence for the effectiveness of the punishment approach to criminal justice. However, a closer look at the crime rate and incarceration trends reveals a more complex story. While crime rates have been declining, the extent to which this can be attributed to increased incarceration rates is minimal. In fact, recent research has demonstrated that incarcerating more individuals has a diminishing effect on crime rates. Also, the cost of incarceration can often outweigh the benefits of crimes averted, and can even increase crime rates due to negative societal impacts. Evidence for these trends is provided below.

Although overall crime rates have generally decreased in recent decades as imprisonment rates have increased, studies disagree over the size of the effect. Spelman (2000) and Levitt (1996) both found that increases of 10% in the incarceration rate results in a 40% decrease in crime. However, recent studies done with more conservative statistical approaches have come to different conclusions. Bruce Western of Harvard University found that a 10% increase in incarceration leads to just a 10% decrease in the crime rates (Western, 2006). The study concluded that 90% of the drop in crime from 1993 through 2001 would have occurred without the rapid increase in incarceration rates during the same time period. Still others argue that as much as 25% of the crime reduction is a result of the incarceration rate increase (Stemen, 2007;

Wilson, 2008). While estimates of the effect may vary, current research indicates that incarceration rate increases over the last 20 years have had only modest impacts on crime reduction, and therefore the effectiveness of incarceration as a crime deterrent is questionable.

Even those studies that demonstrate the larger effects of incarceration rates on crime acknowledge that the marginal returns of incarceration are diminishing (Spelman, 2000; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2003). Diminishing returns on incarceration means that arresting someone today does not reduce as many crimes as the arrest and incarceration of someone yesterday. In other words, each additional incarceration has less and less affect on crime reduction. Washington State, for example, found that the average number of crimes committed by its inmates prior to their incarceration dropped from 62 in 1980 to 18 by 2001 (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2003). Therefore, the net benefits resulting from crimes averted had also decreased significantly. In Washington, from 1980 to 2001, the benefit-to-cost ratio for drug offenders dropped from \$9.22 to \$0.37.¹ Then, in an updated analysis in 2006, the net benefit for incarcerating additional drug offenders turned negative. The cost to taxpayers was now more than the average value of the crimes avoided by arresting these offenders (Aos, Miller, and Drake, 2006).

“Prison is the most expensive and least effective strategy for a significant number of nonviolent offenders.”

-- Chief Justice William Ray Price, State of the Judiciary Address

A growing amount of evidence suggests that beyond the possible negative cost-benefit relationship of incarceration to crime, there is actually a ‘tipping point’ where higher incarceration rates are associated with higher crimes rates (Clear, Rose, Waring, and Scully, 2003; Liedka, Piehl, & Useem, 2006). These studies contend that while incarceration does indeed reduce crime, it does so only to a point, after which crime actually begins to increase again. Liedka, Piehl, and Useem estimated the tipping point to be between 325 and 430 inmates per 100,000 people. So, in addition to paying the high financial costs of imprisonment, taxpayers may also be burdened with the costs of even more crime. There is evidence that this tipping point may be due to the

¹ Benefit-to-cost ratios are computed by summing the benefits of avoided crimes (victim costs and taxpayer cost) and then dividing by the estimated cost of incarceration. Studies often cited for the calculation of victim costs (Miller, Cohen, & Wiersma, 1996; Rajkumar & French, 1997) make their calculations based on medical care, lost wages, reduced productivity, property damage, and general pain and suffering.

extensive damage done to families and to the communities who experience high levels of incarceration. This is discussed further in a later section on the social impact of our correctional policies.

Finally, research shows prison has little effect on an offender's likelihood of reoffending once released. In fact, recent studies have shown a criminogenic effect of imprisonment in that those sent to prison had higher recidivism rates than those who were sentenced to probation (Spohn and Holleran, 2002; Nieuwbeerta et al., 2006). The study done by Spohn and Holleran on offenders in Jackson County, Missouri found the effect to be even larger for drug offenders. Results showed drug offenders who were sentenced to prison were more likely to reoffend than other similar drug offenders who were instead sentenced to probation. This suggests that prison terms for drug offenders are an especially ineffective approach. Ultimately, the increased use of prison as a tool for reducing crime rates or the reoffense rates of convicted offenders, and thus improving public safety, is not consistent with much of the current research.

Budgetary Implications

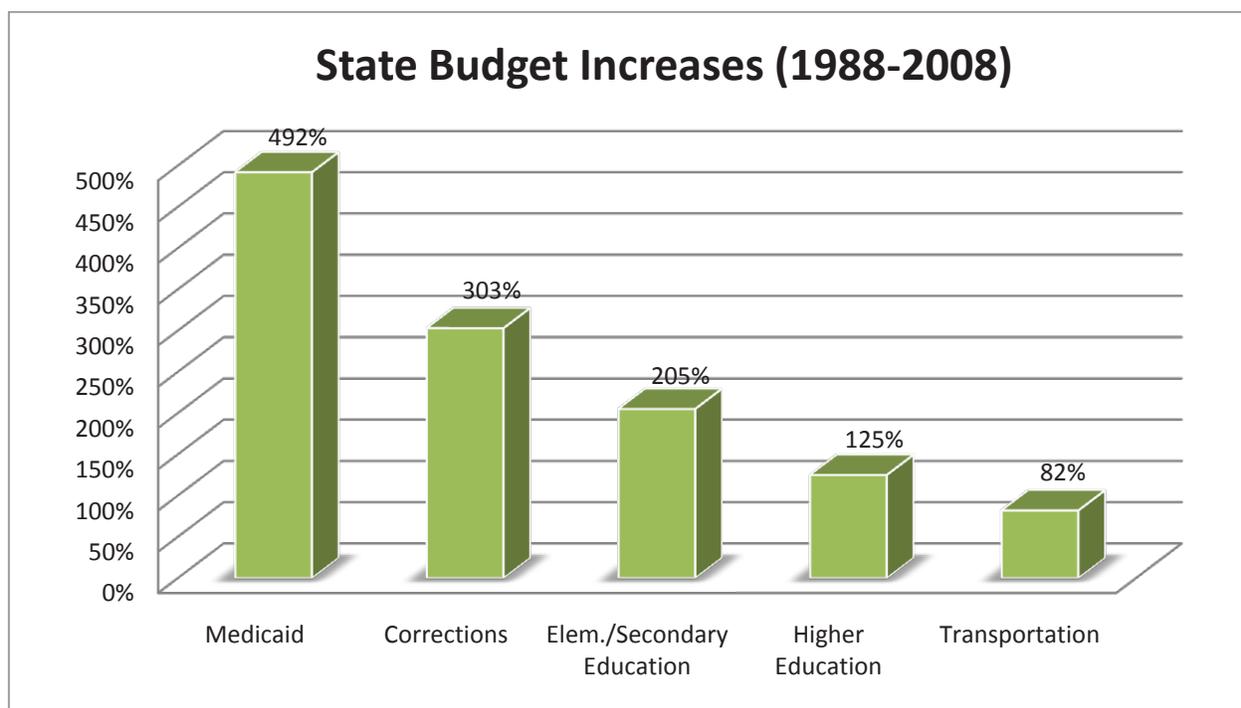
A world-leading incarceration rate comes with a very big price tag. When considering all levels of government, the total annual amount spent on corrections is currently about \$68 billion (FY2008), 88% of which goes to prisons (Pew Center on the States, 2009). States have increased their corrections budget by 303% in the last 20 years (See Figure 2). This

surpasses the budget increases in all other categories except Medicaid (492%). In 2008, Missouri spent \$569 million on corrections. This accounted for 7.4% of the entire state budget, which was higher than the national average of 6.8%. In the same year, Missouri spent \$936 million on higher education. In other words, for every dollar spent on higher education, 65 cents was spent on corrections. For Missouri, this amounts to about \$16,457 a year for the incarceration of an offender in a state prison (Missouri Department of Corrections, "Annual Report 2009"). It costs a person about the same amount to attend a public university in Missouri for a year (including tuition, room and board).

Social Impact

Another set of research informs us of how high incarceration rates may actually lead to higher crimes rates once a tipping point is surpassed. Beyond the immediate financial costs to taxpayers for incarcerating offenders, there are serious consequences experienced by families and communities. By looking at the damage done to those other than the offender, we see evidence of how high incarceration rates create environments that lead to even higher crime rates.

For communities, social norms are distorted and networks broken when large numbers of young men are removed (Clear et al., 2003; Lynch and Sabol, 2004). The effect is especially obvious in urban areas that lose more than one in nine of their young black men to prison (Pew Center on the States, 2008). The resulting gender imbalance distorts



Source: The Pew Center on the States, "One in 31: the long reach of American Corrections"

Note: Figures not adjusted for inflation. \$1 in 1988 = \$1.82 in 2008 (82%)

the social norms that typically promote stable relationships and the creation of family units because it empowers the remaining young men at the expense of young women in the community. As a result, women may be less willing to leave unhealthy relationships and men may feel less inclined to commit to a parenting role. It was this dynamic that led epidemiologists James Thomas and Elizabeth Torrone to study the effects of incarceration rates on sexual behavior in poor neighborhoods. The results of the study done on North Carolina counties showed that increased incarceration rates in one year were associated with increases in the reported cases of gonorrhea and chlamydia among women the following year (Thomas and Torrone, 2006). They also found that doubling the incarceration rate was correlated with an increase in the number of childbirths to teenage women by 71.61 births per 100,000 teenage women, a 32% increase.

Heather MacDonald of *City Journal*, discussed in a recent article the juvenile violence taking place in Chicago and the role of illegitimacy rates. The vast majority of perpetrators and victims in Chicago's 40 year battle with juvenile murders have come from single-parent homes. She highlights the recent case where a youth was killed by 5 other juveniles, all of whom were from fatherless homes. She points out that in Cook County, 15% of white children are born out of wedlock, compared to 79% of all black children. The outcome, she argues is the disproportionate black crime rate. Thirty-five percent of the population in Chicago is black, and yet 76% of all homicides are committed by blacks. The black-illegitimacy rate and disproportionate black crime rates are similar in other urban centers. With a significant portion of black men in urban areas imprisoned, it is hard to ignore the role of our incarceration policies in the breakdown of the family units in places like Chicago.

(*City Journal*. October 1, 2010)

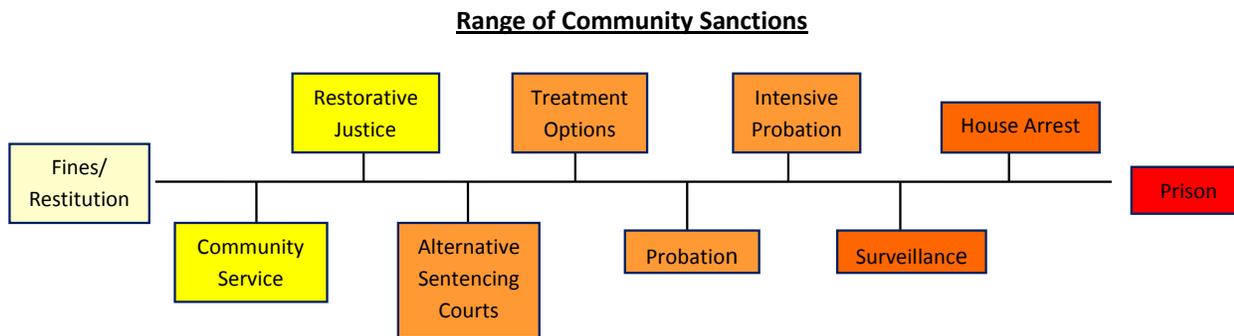
Incarceration has a variety of effects on the family unit. For those that go to prison, the likelihood of being married is significantly reduced. The effect is greatest among black males over the age of 23, who are 50% less likely to get married (Thomas, 2005). Additionally, 66% of those in prison who were once married are now divorced, compared to 17% for non-imprisoned adults (Lynch and Sabol, 2004). Incarceration prevents the creation of family units, but it also has negative effects on how existing family units function. The loss of income caused by the removal of the male partner leads to even greater financial hardship for families who are often already financially unstable.

The destruction of existing family units and the barriers to creating new ones caused by mass incarceration are not without consequences for the children involved. While still difficult to separate the result from other environmental factors such as parenting traits, substance abuse history, and mental health problems, there is a growing body of research that has identified a negative effect of incarceration on children (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Rucker, 2007). The adverse outcomes experienced by children of incarcerated parents include antisocial behavior, mental health problems, drug abuse, school failure, and unemployment (Murray and Farrington, 2008). A few studies suggest that children of incarcerated parents are three to six times more likely to exhibit serious delinquent behavior (Lee, 2005). Beyond the direct effects of having an incarcerated parent there are consequences for children that grow up in an environment where so many people go to prison. For children in these communities, prison is a typical life experience among family and friends. Therefore, due to the commonality of incarceration, the risk of going to prison for the next generation is now a less persuasive crime deterrent.

Policy Alternatives

Two strategies could be pursued to address both the growing cost of the correctional system and the damages to communities that mass incarceration causes. First, send less people to prison. This can be done through alternative sentencing that diverts nonviolent offenders away from prison. Second, because 97% of U.S. prisoners will one day be released, invest more time and resources in the services provided to offenders reentering the community. The result of these changes would be that fewer people are sent to prison and those who are released from prison are less likely to return, both outcomes would lower the cost to the corrections system and reduce the negative social consequences of mass incarceration.

FIGURE 3: RANGE OF COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS



Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Send fewer people to prison

One way that Missouri and other states can begin to reduce the number of people going to prison is by taking advantage of alternative sentencing strategies. As Figure 3 illustrates, there are a range of sanctions that can be utilized. This is certainly not a comprehensive list, but it does show the wide range of options available. It begins with “Fines/Restitution” for the most minor of offenses and ends with “Prison” for the most dangerous felons. Removal from society is seen as the last option on this continuum, but over the previous 20 years it has been used increasingly for offenders who pose little threat to public safety. A study done in Arizona ranked all offenders entering the Arizona prison system by the harm created the year prior to incarceration. The results showed that those in the 20th percentile (least amount of harm) imposed just \$3,950 in social costs due to their crimes. It was concluded that 50% of all new prison inmates would cost more to incarcerate than the crimes avoided by removing the offender from the community (Manhattan Institute, 1999). It is these nonviolent offenders who present the least amount of risk to the community and could be funneled into alternative sanctions rather than going to prison. To illustrate the potential impact of this strategy, 78.8% of prison admissions in Missouri in 2009 were considered nonviolent offenders (Missouri Department of Corrections, “2009 Offender Profile”). Furthermore, there is evidence that certain criminal behavior, like predatory street crime, is merely carried out by someone new when an offender is removed from the community (Felson, 2003). This replacement scenario is particularly true for non-violent offenders such as those involved in ordinary drug offenses. Once again, the high cost of incarceration, both financially and socially, appears to produce very little real benefit.

By utilizing the alternatives to incarceration, illustrated above, there are some obvious benefits. First, fewer people are being removed from the community and therefore families and support systems are less disrupted. Secondly, alternative sentencing programs reduce the financial burden on the corrections system. In Missouri, the average cost per day of incarcerating an offender is \$45.09, however the daily cost of

community supervision is \$3.71 and for electronic monitoring it is \$10.71 (Missouri Department of Corrections, “Annual Report 2009”). With the limited impact prison has on deterring crime or on preventing offenders from reoffending, there is little reason for continuing to incarcerate offenders at our current rate and good reason to seek alternatives.

Recently, Missouri has taken a big step forward in considering the costs to the correctional system of incarcerating offenders. Through the Missouri Sentencing Advisory Commission (MOSAC), Missouri was the first state to provide judges with data specific to each offender about what a sentence will cost as well as that offender’s predicted reoffense rate. By doing so judges are even more informed of the cost and effectiveness of a sentence for each type of offender.

Example of MOSAC report: This report was constructed based on the following offender characteristics: 20 year old male, H.S. diploma, part-time job, no prior felony record, suspected of substance abuse, and was convicted of second-degree robbery (no weapon and no one was hurt). He is rated as an “above average” risk for reoffending. A Class B felony carries a maximum of 15 years in prison. MOSAC produces 3 possible sentences based on the offense and provides the predicted recidivism rate for an offender with the given characteristics and the sentence described.

- **“Mitigating Sentence” (lower range):** Five years probation at a cost of \$1,354 a year for a total of \$6,770. Recidivism rate: 29.7%.
- **“Presumptive Sentence” (middle range):** Five years probation with enhanced supervision at a cost of \$1,792 a year for a total of \$8,960. Recidivism rate: 29.7%.
- **“Aggravating Sentence” (upper range):** Five years in prison at a cost of \$16,823 a year, but with an expectation that 3.1 years will be served. 1.9 years on parole at a cost of \$1,354 a year. The total cost of the sentence amounting to \$54,724. Recidivism rate: 39.6%.

Source: Ratcliffe, H. (2010, September 14). Missouri Judges Get Penalty Cost Before Sentencing. St. Louis Post Dispatch

The next step in reducing the number of people sent to prison is to reform sentencing laws. There are at least three areas that are in need of reform, based on current research. First, prison sentences for ordinary drug crimes could be eliminated. As discussed above, incarceration of minor drug offenders costs more than the average value of the crimes averted and incarceration appears to actually increase the reoffense rate for these offenders. Secondly, mandatory minimum sentences could be eliminated. There simply is no clear correlation between length of stay in prison and the likelihood to reoffend (Langan and Levin, 2002). Finally, states could consider changing the approach used for offenders who violate conditions of their parole. In Missouri and many other states, technical violations such as failing to report to a parole officer as expected or failing to maintain employment can result in a return to prison. In 2006, 35% of prison admissions were due to parole violations, two-thirds of which were returned for technical violations (Sabol and Courture, 2007; Clear, Cole, and Reisig, 2009). Once again, the removal of these individuals from society often does more harm than good and therefore alternatives to revocation should be utilized.

Improve and Expand Reentry services

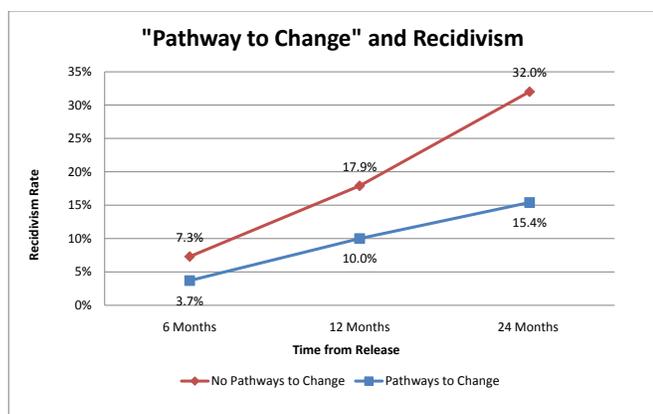
Ninety-seven percent of the 2.3 million people behind bars in the U.S. will one day be released. Over 600,000 are released back into the community each year. These offenders come out of prison with all the same characteristics that contributed to their criminality such as inadequate education, mental health problems, and histories of substance abuse. Without a sufficient structure in place to support offender’s reentry back

into the community, we can expect a large portion to commit new crimes and return to prison. Of course, this once again removes the individual from the community, with all of its negative consequences, and it also places additional costs on the correctional system. Unfortunately, 7 out of 10 inmates do in fact return to prison within three years of their release, either due to a new crime or a technical violation (Visher and Travis, 2003). Clearly, there is room for improvement in our reentry services.

Reentry programs provide opportunities to address offender behaviors and beliefs that have negative consequences in their lives. Research is somewhat mixed on the effectiveness of many reentry programs, but there is growing evidence about what does and does not work. Those programs that focus on creative abilities, physical conditioning, or self-esteem do not reduce criminal behavior. The programs that focus on more than one of the crime-producing factors such as anti-social behaviors and beliefs, negative peer associations, self-control skills, and substance abuse have shown the greatest impact on reducing recidivism (Lowenkamp and Latessa, 2005). The way in which these factors are addressed is also important. Interventions such as bibliotherapy (reading books), drug and alcohol education, emotional appeals, lectures, and self-help are considered non-behavioral and are shown to be largely ineffective. On the other hand, cognitive-behavioral approaches do seem to produce positive results in reducing recidivism.

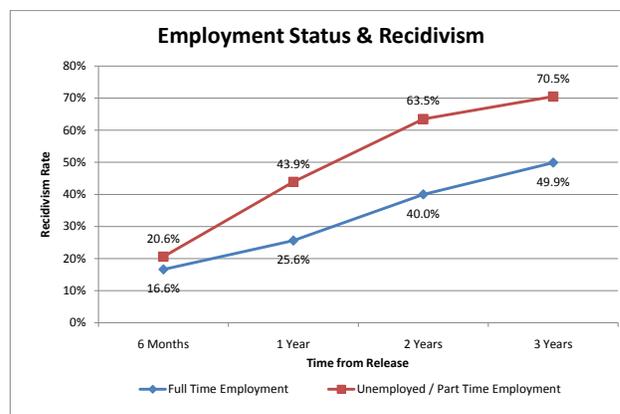
Cognitive-behavioral programs target anger, attitudes, beliefs, peers, substance abuse, and values, but are action-oriented rather than talk-oriented. These interventions

FIGURE 4: RECIDIVISM RATES FOR “PATHWAY TO CHANGE” PARTICIPANTS



Source: Missouri Board of Probation and Parole, “2009 Annual Report”.

FIGURE 5: RECIDIVISM RATES AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS



Source: Missouri Department of Corrections, (2008) “MRP Steering Team Updated Baseline Outcome Results and Sentencing County Analysis”.²

² The differences in recidivism rates between the two graphs are due to differences in the population being measured. Figure 4 describes the recidivism rate for both probationers and parolees. Figure 5 describes the recidivism rate for prison releases, which are mainly parolees. Probationers typically have lower recidivism rates than parolees, and therefore their inclusion in Figure 4 results in lower percentages.

identify negative behaviors and beliefs, then the offender is asked to substitute those beliefs with new learned skills. This is done through modeling, practice, and consistent positive reinforcement. Studies on cognitive-behavioral programs show a 10% reduction in recidivism compared to other types of treatment programs (Lowenkamp and Latessa, 2005). In Missouri, “Pathway to Change” is the primary cognitive-behavioral program and is available to all offenders under the supervision of Probation and Parole. As illustrated in Figure 4, “Pathway to Change” has been found to reduce the 2-year recidivism rate of program participants by over 15% (Missouri Board of Probation and Parole, “2009 Annual Report”).

Another approach to community reentry that has proven successful in reducing recidivism is job programs (Seiter and Kadela, 2003). These programs offer offenders a path to full-time employment which experts believe is essential to a successful reentry into the community. Transitional jobs programs provide temporary, paid jobs, while helping the offender find long term employment. The consistent income also helps to stabilize the financial situation of the families involved. Figure 5 is based on data collected by the Missouri Department of Corrections. After 3 years, offenders who were employed full-time had recidivism rates 20% lower than those who were unemployed or working part-time. The Pew Center on the States examined the FY2008 corrections budgets for 34 states. The results showed that \$18.64 billion went to prisons and only \$2.52 billion went towards probation and parole and other programming outside of prisons. For those 34 states that were examined, of which Missouri was one, the probation and parole funding amounts to about 12% of the total corrections budget, clearly illustrating the focus of corrections spending has been that of punishment rather than rehabilitation and community reentry. The success of cognitive-behavioral programs and job programs in reducing recidivism demonstrates the value of shifting the focus of corrections spending. By improving and expanding these programs there can be gains made in reducing corrections budgets, reducing recidivism, improving the lives of ex-offenders, and strengthening communities.

Conclusion

Over the last 25 years, the U.S. made a series of policy choices in an attempt to reduce crime rates. The success of those policies is questionable based on the current research into the incarceration/crime rate link. The substantial increase in incarceration rates appears to have played only a minor role in the decline in crime, and there is evidence for diminishing returns for each new incarceration. The research done in the state of Washington demonstrates

how sending nonviolent drug-offenders to prison actually costs more than the financial gains of the crimes averted. Furthermore, incarceration actually increases the reoffense rate for some offenders. The financial impact of our growing inmate population is obvious when you consider the growth in corrections budgets is exceeded only by the growth in the Medicaid budgets. Until recently, the negative social consequences have been less obvious, but new research highlights the disruption to social norms and destruction of family units that mass incarceration causes. Ultimately, the benefits of increased incarceration rates are minimal and the costs are significant and far reaching.

Public safety should always remain a priority, but as the research described above indicates, higher incarceration rates are not an effective tool for reducing crime and it has very clear consequences for budgets and communities. Dangerous offenders do exist and need to be removed from society. However, our incarceration policies are now removing nonviolent offenders who would be far better served, and whose families would be better served, through alternative sanctions and rehabilitative services. The concept of public safety, as seen by the general public, is that being tough on crime makes everyone safer. Policy-makers have played into this view by presenting themselves as being “tough on crime” and enacting increasingly punitive correctional policies. We now know that this is an ineffective approach to crime prevention and has serious consequences for many communities. To make the necessary improvements, policy-makers must be willing to challenge the misperceptions of the past. Today’s economic environment presents a unique opportunity to reexamine our returns on investment and by doing so we can create policies that increase public safety while still reducing the number of people behind bars.

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