

**“Reducing Recidivism: Stopping the
Trend of Criminal Relapse in America”**

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The corrections system in the United States has come under serious scrutiny in the past few years. Since the early 1900's the inmate population in the United States has grown tremendously. No other country in the world has such a high percentage of its population incarcerated. About 750 people out of every 100,000 are incarcerated in the United States. The world average is only 166 per 100,000. Our high incarceration rate has helped boost the United States' annual budget for law enforcement and corrections to over \$200 billion (Webb 2007). One of the underlying causes for the large number of inmates in the United States corrections system is recidivism. Recidivism is when a criminal, released from incarceration, relapses into criminal behavior and is re-imprisoned. The recidivism rate in the United States is 67% (Aborn 2005). Two thirds of the inmates released from United States' correctional institutes will be incarcerated again. There are, however, steps that can be taken to reduce the recidivism rate. Many people feel that our punitive practices of incarceration stigmatize criminals and lead to large inmate populations. They promote programs of restorative justice instead. Other programs including drug rehabilitation, family services, and education have all proven to reduce recidivism rates. The United States must reverse its trend of increasing prison populations and reduce recidivism by involving convicted criminals in these programs.

Restorative justice is a system of criminal rehabilitation that focuses on the damages caused to individuals and communities by criminal offenders. Its goal is to make offenders take responsibility for their actions. Advocates of restorative justice feel that incarceration does not teach offenders that their actions are morally wrong. Their crimes are treated as violations of state laws and not wrongs against their peers and communities. The theory of restorative justice is built upon human morality. The victim of a crime plays a central role in the reconciliation of the offense which is usually accomplished through restorative dialogue and reparations.

The process of restorative dialogue serves two purposes. First, the victims are given a chance to confront the offender and bring closure to the incident. Second, the offenders are brought face to face with the victims of their crimes and forced to see the effects of their actions. Criminal hearings are usually impersonal and bureaucratic. They create an adversarial relationship between the offender and the court system. The offender is focused on his legal situation and how to reduce the penalties for his actions. The system does not help the offender to realize the human costs of his actions. The process of restorative dialogue forces the offender to sit face to face with his victim and personalizes his crime (Duzr and Wertheimer 2002). After restorative dialogue offenders can begin to be reintegrated into society.

Reintegration is an essential part of restorative justice. Once the victim has gotten closure and the offender has taken responsibility for his actions, the offender can begin to become a normal member of society. The current corrections system stigmatizes offenders. It labels them as criminals who deserve to be punished and casts them out from normal society. Albert A. Duzr and Alan Wertheimer wrote, “Stigmatization is ultimately counterproductive because outcasts tend to reject their rejecters” (2002: 8). Reintegration is a process in which an offender’s community expresses their disapproval of the offender’s actions but agrees to accept the offender back into their society. In this way the offender is not cast out but assimilated into his community. Ideally this would reduce the recidivism rate of offenders by reintegrating them into society instead of ostracizing them as criminals (Duzr and Wertheimer 2002).

Unfortunately, restorative justice is not perfect. There are no serious punishments to deter criminals from committing crimes. Under restorative justice a thief may have to pay his victim back for the stolen property in addition to some extra reparations. That may not deter the

thief because he may decide that the rewards of the crime are worth the risk of repaying the victim.

In Vermont and Minnesota, restorative justice has been applied to the criminal system in certain cases. Instead of abolishing incarceration, these states have used restorative justice as a rehabilitation tool to supplement it. Offenders who complete restorative justice programs can benefit from reduced sentences (Immarigeon 1995). Both the offenders and the victims are able to benefit from the process of restorative justices without removing the deterrent of punishment. While the theory of restorative justice provides some alternatives to simple incarceration and may reduce recidivism, it still needs some study and fine tuning before it can be considered a solution.

Drug rehabilitation is something that has proven to help recidivism rates. There have been many studies done in the United States documenting the high crime rates associated with drug use. These studies show that crime rates are higher while addicts were using drugs; there is a connection between the amount of drugs used and the amount of crimes committed, and that drug users commit more crimes than average criminals (Inciardi et al 1997).

There are a large percentage of inmates who could be reached by drug treatment programs. The Federal Bureau of Prisons reported that 52.2% of inmates housed in federal prisons were held on drug offenses (United States 2009). While there are inmates who are incarcerated for selling drugs, not for using them, four out of every five people arrested for drug offenses are arrested for possession (Webb 2007).

Drug treatment programs can significantly reduce recidivism. A study published in 1997 by James A. Inciardi et al. compiled data from Delaware on inmates who receive treatment both in prison and in a work release program followed by aftercare. The study shows just how

effective treatment can be. More than three fourths of the offenders who complete both in-prison treatment and the work release program with aftercare do not recidivate. The study also shows that inmates who only complete the in-prison treatment and do not move on to the work release and aftercare program are more likely to recidivate than those who do not participate in any programs at all. This illustrates the importance of continued treatment after a prisoner's release. A prisoner's reintegration into society is the most important part of their recovery (Inciardi et al 1997).

Another factor in prisoners' likelihood to recidivate is their family relationship. Prisoners' recidivism rates are associated with the amount of contact they receive with their families. Prisoners are also less likely to recidivate if they live with their spouses after returning home from prison (Austin and Hardyman 2004). Some states, like Pennsylvania, have incorporated family programs into their corrections system.

In the Pennsylvania prison system they have programs designed to help inmates maintain and improve their family relations. In the state's prisons for women the program includes parenting classes, child development classes, and counseling to help them cope with the difficult task of parenting while they are incarcerated. The most important part of the program is a playroom where children can interact with their mothers and a mother-child retreat. The communities surrounding the prisons also help out. Many families offer housing for children and relatives who travel long distances so they can visit for multiple days (Couturier 1995).

The men's prisons in Pennsylvania are also developing programs to improve their inmates' family relationships. They have built child playrooms where fathers can interact with their children in a positive setting as well as counseling groups to help fathers improve their parenting skills and increase family contact. There are multiple community organizations which

conduct classes, seminars and counseling sessions (Couturier 1995). These family services are an example of how states can improve their corrections systems to help inmates establish and maintain healthy family relationships and reduce recidivism. In addition to family services, educational programs also help improve recidivism rates.

Education is something that a majority of the inmates in the United States correction system lack. Only 25% of state prisoners have completed their high school education. There are classes offered in facilities as well as internet based classes to provide inmates with educational opportunities. There are programs for obtaining both high school general equivalency degrees and college degrees. Many correctional systems offer reduced sentencing for inmates who complete educational programs (“Postsecondary” 2003).

While many people feel that education is beneficial to inmates, some feel that they have not earned the privilege of taking college level courses or obtaining a postsecondary education. A study done in New York, however, shows that inmates who complete a postsecondary education while incarcerated are four times less likely to recidivate. This makes postsecondary education a valuable tool in rehabilitating criminals and introducing them back into functioning society. Unfortunately, federal and state governments have continuously cut funding for prison-based educational programs over the last decade. In 1994, the federal government made inmates ineligible for Pell Grants which were the largest source of funding for postsecondary education within the correction system. Since 1994 there has been a drastic decrease in postsecondary education of inmates. In 1993, 83% of all corrections systems offered programs for postsecondary education, by 2000 that number had dropped to only 27% (“Postsecondary” 2003).

Recently, some states have renewed their interest in postsecondary education, but many continue to cut its funding in order to save money. The Correctional Education Association did a study comparing the recidivism rates of over 3000 offenders in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio. They found that the offenders who have taken classes while incarcerated are less likely to recidivate. They also found that for every dollar spent on prisoner education, the government saves two dollars in re-incarceration costs (Lewin 2001). While federal and state governments are saving money in the short-term by cutting funding for education in correctional institutes, they are losing money in the long-term. Education is a proven way to reduce recidivism, but it needs to regain the government support it has lost since 1994 in order to reach its true potential.

Unfortunately, many people in the United States believe that instead of focusing on rehabilitating prisoners and reducing recidivism, we should be building more prisons to house a growing number of inmates. Richard K. Willard wrote an article entitled “There is No Alternative to Building More Prisons,” in which he argues that states should not be lenient with “non-threatening” offenders. He states:

“In state and federal penitentiaries alike, most prisoners have long histories of antisocial criminal conduct...We must provide sufficient space in our prisons so that these repeat and violent criminals can be incapacitated for much longer sentences than are now being imposed--not shorter ones.”(1995)

This type of thinking has led to the United States owning the largest incarceration rate in the world. While some criminals may be “chronic offenders,” not all of the United States’ incarcerated population is beyond help. Many rehabilitation programs have proven to reduce recidivism and should be implemented. In these tough economic times, we need to explore long-term solutions to reverse the trend of our growing prison population before increasing our large

budget for law enforcement and corrections by building more prisons. Building more prisons to house a growing number of inmates is not a long-term solution. We need to address the cause of the problem by reducing recidivism rather than locking a larger and larger portion of our population behind bars.

Recidivism is a huge problem for the American people. Minorities suffer worse from its effects than any other people. Census information from 2001 shows that 46% of inmates were African-American and 36% were Hispanic. At that time only 12.3% of the United States population was African-American and 12.6% Hispanic, making the amount of minorities incarcerated in the United States hugely disproportionate (Harrison and Beck 2002). African-Americans are also 5% more likely to recidivate than whites (Langan and Levin 2002). This makes reducing recidivism very important to the American minority communities.

Sadly, the programs that reduce recidivism have not received the support they need in order to be effective. A survey of prisoners about to be released in 1997 shows that only 35% had participated in any kind of educational program and only 13% had participated in any kind of prerelease program (Lynch and Sabol). The United States has the worst incarceration rate in the world. It has an opportunity to reduce its incarcerated population and improve the futures of its inmates by reducing the recidivism rates. This can be accomplished through programs like drug rehabilitation, family services, and education. There are also unexplored opportunities that restorative justice offers. Recidivism must be fought with community support. The most important step in rehabilitating a criminal is reintegrating them into society. By supporting community-based programs such as restorative justice and by involving inmates in community supported programs, the high recidivism rate in the United States can be reduced.

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