Recidivism: Costs and Solutions

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**Introduction**

Citizens of the United States of America enjoy an immense amount of freedom. The freedom to conduct commerce, the freedom to travel, the freedom to choose a profession, the freedom to live in the place of their choosing, the freedom to maintain privacy, the freedom to speak their mind, the freedom to participate in government, the list could continue for pages. However, the subject of this writing is not about the freedoms that most Americans enjoy. In fact, is revolves around the rather large minority of the American population that does not enjoy these freedoms. This minority group is not a racial or ethnic group, nor is it a group distinguished by their sexual orientation or gender. The group that is being referred to is the 2.3 million Americans that are incarcerated at any given time.

The incarcerated population in the United States dwarfs all others. Even nations with much larger overall populations have much lower numbers of incarcerated people. The reasons for this are many, including the much longer prison sentences given to U.S. criminal offenders, the use of incarceration as punishment for all manner of minor offenses and even democracy itself plays its role, as no politician wants to be known for being “soft on crime.” While the exact reasons for yet another area of American exceptionalism can be debated, it is a fact that such a crime control strategy cannot be sustained as it currently exists.

High U.S. incarceration rates are a relatively new phenomenon. In fact, until the mid 1970s, American incarceration rates were rather low; about 100 per 100,000. However, within the last three decades, the U.S. has managed to launch that number to 751 per 100,000 (Liptak, 2008). As one could imagine, such a policy becomes quite expensive after a while and the U.S. now finds the financial burden too much to bear. For the first time in history, states’ expenditures on corrections are being cut and the question much be asked, what about public safety?

The crime control policy in the United States for the past several decades has been incapacitation. This theory takes notice of the overwhelming rates of criminal recidivism and takes the position that a small number of people commit the majority of crime. Therefore, if those few individuals who continue to recidivate, commonly referred to as “career criminals,” can be incarcerated, they cannot commit more crimes. This, in turn, reduces crime overall. There has been some research that has found that incapacitation does in fact reduce crime (Blumstein, 2006) (Kim, 2007) (Piquero & Blumstein, 2007). However, such a policy is not sustainable in the long term. The examination must then turn to other means that can ensure a similar, or preferably better, level of public safety.

In such an examination, recidivism should still be a key component. The majority of people incarcerated will be re-arrested within 3 years (Langan & Levin, 2002). This cycle becomes increasingly expensive. The focus should switch to reducing the high levels of recidivism which will in turn lower the population of incarcerated people, thereby lowering the sharply increasing expenditures on corrections. If recidivism is reduced, this will still maintain public safety because less crime will be committed. In order to properly understand the topic of recidivism and its cost to the American corrections institution, is must be examined and analyzed through a proper academic perspective.

**The True Level of Recidivism**

There are currently two major nationwide studies that attempt to estimate the actual level of recidivism in the United States of America. Both of these studies have been conducted and published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The first of these studies began in 1983 and used a sample of 16,000 prisoners that were released in that year. The study took this sample from eleven states including California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon and Texas, which accounted for just over 57% of all prisoners released in the nation that year. The study defined recidivism in three ways. The first was re-arrest (for a felony or serious misdemeanor), the second was re-conviction, and the third was re-incarceration. The study followed the sample for three years and recorded any instances that would fall under one or more of the three criteria making up offender recidivism.

The study found that the overall re-arrest rate for the sample stood at 62.5%, meaning that 62.5% of the sample was re-arrested, for a serious felony or misdemeanor, within the three year study period. The study further found that the re-conviction and re-incarceration rates stood at 46.8% and 41.4% respectively. Recidivism rates were highest in the first year after release with 40% of the sample being re-arrested. Approximately 5% of the sample had 45 or more criminal charges in their lifetime and 26% had been charged 20 or more times (Beck & Shipley, 1989).

The study also looked at which groups are most likely to recidivate. For instance, recidivism and age were inversely related, meaning the older the individual at time of release, the less likely they would recidivate. Likewise, the more extensive an individual’s criminal history, the more likely they were to recidivate. Only 38% of first time offenders were re-arrested within the three year study period as opposed to the 74% that were re-arrested with eleven or more prior arrests. Together, age and prior criminal history were the best indicators of criminal recidivism. An astounding 94.1% of prisoners aged 18 to 24 with eleven or more prior arrests were re-arrested within three years. Interestingly, property offenders had a higher rate of re-arrest than did violent offenders, 68.1% and 59.6% respectively. Property offenders also had higher rates of re-conviction (53%) and re-incarceration (47.7%) (Beck & Shipley, 1989). This supports the notion that the American justice system is particularly punitive towards minor offenders.

The second major study measuring recidivism in the United States looked at prisoners released in 1994. The study again followed the prisoners for a three year period, but added a fourth measure of recidivism, returning to prison with or without a new sentence. This allows a distinction between those prisoners being sent back to prison for a new crime and those being sent back for a violation of their release. The sample size used for this study was more than double the size of the 1983 study and stood at 38,624, which included prisoners released from fifteen states. The fifteen states included the eleven from the 1983 study with the addition of Arizona, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

The 1994 study found a significant increase in most measurements of recidivism. For instance, 67.5% of the sample was re-arrested for a new crime; an increase of 5%. Re-conviction remained stable and only rose an insignificant .1% to 46.9%. However, re-incarceration rates rose 10.4% to 51.8% of the sample. This is likely due to the increased popularity of revoking a prisoner’s supervision for technical infractions as only 25.4% of the sample was re-sentenced to prison for a new crime. As in 1983, recidivism was most likely to occur within one year of release as 44.1% of the sample was re-arrested within that time period. Roughly 6.4% of the prisoners in the sample had 45 or more criminal charges in their lifetime, which accounted for 14% of all criminal charges. Prisoners with 25 or more charges made up about 24% of the sample, which accounted for 52% of all criminal charges (Langan & Levin, 2002).

As with the 1983 study, the 1994 study examined which demographics were most likely to recidivate and came to similar conclusions. Age was again inversely related to recidivism with younger offenders having much higher rates of recidivism (80% of those under 18 were re-arrested) compared to older offenders (45.3% of those 45 or older were re-arrested). Similarly, the number of prior arrests was also a very good indicator of whether an individual would recidivate. Prisoners with only one prior arrest had a re-arrest rate of 40.6% compared to a re-arrest rate of 82.1% for those with more than 15 prior arrests (Langan & Levin, 2002).

As illustrated above, recidivism rates in the United States are staggering and are only increasing with time. A critical examination of the data allows us to determine the groups with the highest risk for recidivism, which is very helpful when attempting to target solutions in the most beneficial manner, as resources are always constrained. It is easy to picture the justice system as a revolving door where the same individuals are continually recycled through the system with no real intervention taking place. If recidivism is to be hindered, and costs to be lessened, all the while maintaining public safety, such studies need to be continued in order to assess any programs that have been instituted which are aimed at the reduction of recidivism. Understanding the true level of recidivism is the first step in attempting to intervene in the cycle. With that being said, the studies presented above are a little dated. However, there is a new study due for publishing by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2012. It will be interesting to see if recidivism has continued to increase with time, stagnated, or even reduced.

**International Recidivism Rates**

Comparing recidivism rates on an international level can be problematic. Various countries measure recidivism in different ways. Some countries define it as re-conviction only, why others define it as re-imprisonment only. The length of time that other governments follow released offenders can also vary, meaning that not every nation has data available for a three year time span following release from prison. Given these limitations, caution must be taken when attempting to compare recidivism rates across national borders. However, a general comparison between national recidivism rates, keeping these limitations in mind, can serve to put a proper perspective on the American issue.

In Canada, recidivism is generally measured only in terms of re-conviction. Canadian studies report a re-conviction rate of 44% for a two year study period (Gannon, Mihorean, Beattie, Taylor-Butts, & Kong, 2005). In the United Kingdom, the Scottish government calculates its own rate of recidivism and the Ministry of Justice calculates the rate for England and Wales. Like Canada, both U.K. calculations define recidivism as re-conviction. However, unlike Canada, or the U.S., both the Scottish government and the Ministry of Justice calculate recidivism rates on a yearly basis using a new cohort of released prisoners. Scotland’s re-conviction rate is approximately 44% for one year (Scottish Government Statistician Group, 2010). The Ministry of Justice’s re-conviction calculation for England and Wales is roughly 41% for one year (Ministry of Justice, 2011). In Australia, recidivism is measured through re-incarceration rates only and encompasses a ten year study. Their re-imprisonment rate stands at 39.2% for ten years (Austrailian Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

On the surface, these rates generally equate to the rates found in the U.S., with the exception of Australia’s rate of re-imprisonment. The 1994 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found a three year re-conviction rate of 46.9% in the United States, making it higher than in Canada, Scotland, England or Wales. However, no other re-conviction study cited above followed their sample for a three year time span. The Canadian study was only conducted for two years. The U.S. re-conviction rate for the first two years following release was a substantially lower 36.4%. The one year re-conviction rate in the U.S. was even lower, standing at 21.5% (Langan & Levin, 2002). When compared to the one year studies from the United Kingdom, the U.S. re-conviction rate is roughly half. The explanation of such vastly different rates of re-conviction could be explained through any number of variations in policy, legislation, or bureaucracy. It may simply be that the Canadian and U.K. justice systems are more adept at processing criminals through their respective court systems, as the U.S. rates catch up after a year or two.

Australia’s uncommonly long study of ten years finds a much lower rate of re-imprisonment than that of the U.S. in just three years. The U.S. has a re-imprisonment rate of 51.8% over a three year time span, though this does include offenders who violated terms of their supervision. Australia’s much lower rate of re-imprisonment (39.2%) is very curious, given that the study follows released prisoners for a decade. The caveat here is that the Australian study does not specify between prisoners being re-imprisoned for a new crime or those who had their supervision revoked. The U.S. re-imprisonment rate drops significantly when only new crimes are counted (25.4%) (Langan & Levin, 2002).

All of the above countries are both industrialized and English speaking, which lends them to comparison with the United States. At first glance, the rates of recidivism in these other countries are quite comparable to those found in the U.S. However, when the period of time each study is conducted is taken into account, the similarities dissipate. Recidivism in the U.S. seems to be substantially lower than in the above cited countries. The reasons for this difference are not immediately clear, but the higher rates of recidivism reported for these other countries do not seem to be leading to an equally high incarcerated population. The prisoner rates per 100,000 in Australia, Scotland, England & Wales and Canada are 126, 139, 148 and 107 respectively (Walmsley, 2006). Where high recidivism rates in the U.S. have greatly impacted the prison population, the same does not seem to be true for similar countries.

**The True Cost of Recidivism**

Corrections spending in the United States is the second fastest growing state expenditure, outpaced only by Medicaid (Scott-Hayward, 2009). Since 1988, state corrections spending has increased more than threefold reaching $52 billion in 2008. This means that 1 in every 15 general fund dollars is spent on corrections (Scott-Hayward, 2009). Even worse, local spending on corrections has increased fivefold from $20 billion in 1988 to $100 billion in 2008 (Rivers, 2010). Such rapid expansion of corrections spending is clearly unsustainable. The current economic downturn has only served to exacerbate and quicken the need for cost cutting measures.

In fiscal year 2009, forty-three states were facing a budget gap of more than $100 billion. Once thought of as the sacred cow, corrections’ budgets have grown so large that state governments can no longer overlook their expenditures in an attempt to cut costs. There are now twenty-six states that have reversed the trend and cut corrections funding in an attempt to close the aforementioned budget gap. Seven of these states (Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska and Washington) have decreased their corrections budgets by ten or more percent. The largest of these reductions stood at nearly 22% in Kansas (Scott-Hayward, 2009).

The extraordinary incarceration rates found in the United States are a very large contributor to the rapid increases in spending. As previously discussed, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rates in the world, and many state sentencing policies carry a large portion of the blame. Three decades of mandatory minimum sentences, enhanced sentencing for drug offenders, three strikes, and truth in sentencing have created more prisoners with longer sentences. More prisoners mean more prisons. The capital expenses alone run approximately $65,000 per bed on average, and after the beds are created, it costs an average of $23,876 a year per prisoner to fill that same bed (Warren, 2008). Given this number, and given the latest re-incarceration rate of 51.8% and the annual state prisons admissions of 674,707, it can be estimated that over a four year period the minimum cost to house prisoners who have recidivated totals $25,033,858,931 (West, Sabol, & Greenman, 2010). The rising cost of healthcare (about 10% a year) coupled with the graying of the prison population will only add to that cost in the future (Warren, 2008).

Some will argue that the U.S. policy of incapacitation is the “best” solution and has already seen great success in reducing crime. As mentioned previously, there are some studies that show a crime reduction correlation with incapacitation. However, the example of Florida’s corrections policies would show that this is most likely not the “best” solution. Florida has the fastest growing prison population in the nation. Between 1993 and 2007, Florida’s inmate population exploded from 53,000 to over 97,000. While population increase likely played a part in that growth, many analysts agree that most of the growth was brought on by the state’s adoption of pro-incarceration policies. For instance, in 1995, Florida abolished all “good time” credits and discretionary release granted by a parole board. The state also instituted policies that all prisoners must serve 85% of their sentence and a mandate that probation officers report every offender who violates a condition of supervision, which increases prison time. The latter policy alone has resulted in Florida adding 12,000 inmates (Warren, 2008).

During this time period, crime in Florida has decreased substantially. However, in the state of New York, the prison population has actually decreased over the same time period and crime rates have still been reduced. Violent crime rates for the state of Florida in 1993 were 1,206 per 100,000. By 2007, Florida’s violent crime rate dropped to 722 per 100,000. This amounts to a 40% reduction in violent crime. In comparison, the violent crime rate in New York stood at 1,073 per 100,000 in 1993 and was reduced to 415 incidents per 100,000 by 2007. This amounts to an even more impressive reduction of 61% over the same time period. Property crime rates saw similar drops over this 14 year time span with reductions in both Florida and New York amounting to 30% and 55.5% respectively (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010). While there are many factors that may have affected the crime rates in each state, the fact still remains that the state of New York was able to reduce both violent and property crime rates without an increased emphasis on incapacitating repeat offenders through high rates of incarceration.

**Evidence-based Solutions to Recidivism**

Public safety is always a chief concern in every state and community. Citizens want to feel safe while walking the streets of their community, shopping at their local malls and allowing their children to play at the local park. An emphasis on public safety allows the general public to live their lives without constant fear of victimization. It is something that everyone wants and therefore is usually a chief concern for public officials. This sentiment, in part, has helped to fuel the high incarceration rates of the past several decades. The public demands increased public safety and politicians deliver by imposing tougher sentencing policies for criminal offenders. However, there is a growing body of research that suggests that such a cycle does not have to be perpetuated in order to maintain the relatively high levels of public safety high incarceration rates have seemed to offer. By addressing the high levels of recidivism, one of the leading causes of such high incarceration rates, public safety can be maintained without the exponentially increasing costs of incapacitation.

When determining how to address recidivism among criminal offenders, it is imperative to employ evidence-based policies and practices. Without program evaluation, it is impossible to determine if there is a financial or public safety benefit to continuing the implementation of that program. If precious financial resources are poured into programs that claim to reduce recidivism, but in reality only serve to maintain the status quo, or worse, exacerbate the issue, then their entire existence is utterly ineffectual and they should be terminated. For example, diversion programs, which typically seek to keep criminal offenders out of the traditional criminal justice system and are largely aimed at juvenile offenders, have been shown to not withstand scientific evaluation. In fact, some suggest that diversion actually causes a “net widening” effect that increases the number of people brought under the auspices of the criminal justice system instead of the opposite (Walker, 2005). Diversion has also been shown to increase recidivism instead of mitigating it as its political proponents make claim (Polk, 1984). Perpetuating ineffective programs will not solve any financial problems, nor will it increase public safety. This is why the importance of implementing policies and programs that have documented success cannot be stressed enough.

In January of 2011, a report outlining the findings from the National Summit on Justice Reinvestment and Public Safety in Washington D.C. on reducing recidivism and correctional spending was published. This report emphasizes programs, policies and practices that have been shown to be successful at reducing recidivism and thereby reducing corrections spending. The publication emphasizes four best practices that evidence suggests represent promising approaches to both the reduction of recidivism and making better decisions in public safety investments.

*Focusing of Individuals that are Most Likely to Re-offend*

The summit found that many states do not focus their community supervision efforts on those individuals that are most likely to commit more crime (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). In fact, many re-entry programs focus on those people that are least likely to re-offend because they either are more likely to seek out treatment and services or show the greatest promise for successful re-entry (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). There is a distinct lacking in most jurisdictions of even possessing the appropriate, validated tools to assess an individual’s potential to recidivate. The lack of such risk assessment tools greatly threatens the effectiveness of some of the most expensive and intensive programs, as the criminal justice system may unknowingly be targeting those programs at the people who need them least.

Risk assessment tools are designed to measure the likelihood that an individual will be re-acquainted with the criminal justice system, through arrest, conviction, or incarceration for a new crime or violation of supervision. Questions on risk assessment tools generally seek information about a person’s criminal history, personality, and life circumstances. This means of assessing the likelihood that an individual will recidivate has shown to be much more reliable than the typical means of risk assessment, the judgment of a professional. For instance, a study out of Ohio found that only 10% of released prisoners classified as low risk, through a validated risk assessment tool, were re-arrested within three years and 70% of released prisoners classified as high risk, through the same assessment tool, were re-arrested within the same three year time span (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

The criteria used to predict an individual’s potential for re-offending are relatively static for all validated risk assessment tools: age at release, criminal history, age at first arrest and the type of crime committed. Researchers have also identified seven dynamic risk factors that can usually be interceded through clinical intervention: anti-social personality, negative expressions about the law, anti-social acquaintances, poor use of leisure time, substance abuse, difficult living circumstances (homeless, neglected or abused) and difficult circumstances at school/work (limited education/unemployed) (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). However, the single most predictive measure, as also indicated by the Bureaus of Justice Statistics reviewed above, is criminal history. The more crimes an individual has committed in the past, the more likely they will commit crimes in the future.

*Base Programs on Science and Ensure Quality*

As mentioned previously, political leaders need to ensure that taxpayer dollars are invested in programs that research has shown to be successful in achieving what they are meant to achieve. It is not enough to fund a substance abuse treatment program and trust that parolees and probationers will utilize it, which in turn will reduce destructive and criminal behaviors. There needs to be oversight of the program. This can promote the funded treatment programs to engage the appropriate clients and ensure that an expert staff is delivering effective services that adhere to research-based best practices (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). If a program does not reduce recidivism, the agency is wasting its efforts and their investments, as with diversion programs. It is important that such programs are not continually fed funding simply because they have been around for decades and are assumed to work or because they are politically popular. All programs must be continually evaluated to ensure they are achieving their stated goals.

*Implement Effective Community Supervision Policies and Practices*

There are roughly five million people either on probation or parole in the United States. This number dwarfs the population of jails and prisons yet probation and parole agencies only receive approximately one eighth the funding of prisons (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). This largely results in greater caseloads, untrained supervising officers and subsequently, more offenders having their supervision revoked and sent to prison. Despite this rather bleak outlook, there have been several programs and practices that have been developed to ensure that community supervision reduces recidivism, which have also been evaluated and scientifically shown to succeed.

It has been shown that in many states, supervising officers are typically unable to quickly respond when an individual violates their terms of supervision (Pew Center on the States, 2008). The court’s process to consider violating an individual is often burdensome and time consuming. By its very nature, it does not allow for swift and certain sanctions against a supervisee. For these reasons, a supervising officer will usually wait to return to the court until they have a laundry list of violations. At this point, it is often too late and the likely penalty for the individual’s violations is revocation of their release and a sentence to prison. Sentencing supervision violators to prison for low-risk behaviors, like missing appointments with their supervisor, only serves to exacerbate the high incarceration rate problem without any measurable returns in increased public safety as these individuals are often very little risk to society. Instead, supervising officers should be given the authority to deliver swift and certain sanctions outside of revocation. This will demonstrate to supervisees that there are immediate consequences for their failure to comply with the conditions of their release. The severity of these sanctions is not as important as the knowledge that punishment will be given in the face of compliance failure (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

There should also be financial incentives put into place for those supervision agencies that succeed in reducing recidivism (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). These incentives would not need to be additional spending since the state will be saving money by not having to house additional prisoners. This money could simply be redistributed to agencies that have helped to save the money in the first place. This would ensure that the goals and objectives of each supervising agency are aligned and provide a motivating factor to achieve higher reductions in recidivism.

Probation and parole agencies could also initiate a practice known as place-based supervision. This strategy is based on the notion that certain geographic areas contain higher concentrations of supervisees. Caseloads, check-ins, and other resource allocations should be based around these high concentration areas. This would help to reduce costly time travel for officers and increase neighborhood collaboration such as the location of treatment centers and employers. Such an approach can also open lines of communication with a supervisee’s family and friends which can help to gain greater amounts of trust from the supervisees (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

*Apply Placed-Based Strategies*

As mentioned previously, people who are released from prison disproportionately return to a small number of communities in their respective states. These places are generally communities that lack social services, housing, employment, or low crime rates. For an individual to change their criminogenic behavior, they must possess the services that are necessary for them to succeed nearby (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

Research has also shown that there is a much greater reduction in recidivism when services are provided to people after they are released from prison as opposed to when they are still incarcerated. Much of the available recidivism reduction resources are delivered to individuals when they are still incarcerated instead of where they go after release. Such a practice ignores the fact that recidivism occurs in the places where released prisoners go, not in the prisons or jails that they came from. Allowing for services and check-ins to be placed in areas with a high concentration of people under supervision also increases compliance with the conditions of their supervision as well as the contact between supervising officers and those they are supervising (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). This in turn can also serve to reduce revocations of supervision.

The four sections above are best practices that research has indicated will reduce recidivism. They are meant to help guide policymakers when drafting legislation or policies that seek to reduce recidivism and address the increasing costs associated with corrections. However, there are also several studies that have been completed that evaluated specific practices and their effect on recidivism. Perhaps the most popular of these practices is the education of inmates. It is theorized that educating inmates while they are serving their incarceration will reduce recidivism by either providing the inmate with a greater marketability for legitimate means of income or by socializing them to a level where they realize the damage incurred, both to themselves and society at large, by committing criminal acts.

One study that looked at prisoners who were released from the states of Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio found support for the notion that education of inmates helps reduce recidivism once they are released. A sample of 3,099 released inmates, including both inmates that participated in an educational program and those that received no education while incarcerated, was used and followed for a three year period after their release. The authors found that those inmates that participated in an educational program while incarcerated had significantly reduced rates of re-arrest (57% to 48%), re-conviction (35% to 27%) and re-incarceration (31% to 21%). The authors also looked at wages earned through legitimate employment and found that inmates who participated in an educational program while incarcerated received higher wages for all three years of the study than those inmates who did not participate in an educational program, though only the wages from the first year were statistically significant (Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001).

There is also some research that indicates that education has an inverse relationship with recidivism, the higher educational level achieved, the lower rates of recidivism. For instance, in one study, inmates that completed two years or more of college had a re-arrest rate of 10%, while the control group had a re-arrest rate of 46%. Another study found similar results, finding that degree holders leaving the Texas Department of Criminal Justice had an overall recidivism rate of 15%, while the general population had a recidivism rate of 60% (Hrabowski III & Robbi, 2002).

Educating prison inmates is not the only evaluated practice for reducing recidivism rates. Increasing an inmate’s social ties has also been suggested as having a reduction effect on recidivism. During incarceration, inmates are cut off from society. Their ties with family, relatives and friends are essentially severed for the duration of their imprisonment. This can many times lead to an eternal end to such supportive relationships. Travis Hirschi’s social bond theory argues that strong relationships with family, friends and the community can serve to confine criminogenic tendencies (Hirschi, 1969). It would stand to reason then that allowing, or even encouraging inmates to maintain those social bonds could help reduce recidivism. Inmate visitation is perhaps the most widely used avenue afforded to prisoners to allow them to maintain social ties with their family and friends. A study out of Florida examined the effect the number of visitations had on an inmate’s propensity towards recidivism. The authors found that the inmates who were visited were 30.7% less likely to recidivate than those who were not visited. Specifically, the authors calculated that with each additional visitation an inmate received, the odds of recidivating decreased by 3.8% (Bales & Mears, 2008). This shows that a large number of visits, which likely indicates a stronger social bond, can compound to create a significant reduction in recidivism.

Electronic monitoring is a relatively new practice designed to both reduce recidivism and save costs associated with imprisonment. Electronic monitoring usually employs an ankle monitoring system that tracks an individual’s geographic location via global positioning system (GPS). It has largely been used as either an alternative to sending pretrial individuals to jail, an alternative to imprisonment, or as a supervision requirement for felons released from prison. The cost savings of using electronic monitoring in place of incarceration can be substantial as the cost on imprisonment is about six times higher than electronic monitoring. Another study using Florida corrections data found that individuals under community supervision that were put on electronic monitoring saw a reduction in failure amounting to 31% when compared to individuals placed on other forms of community supervision. Furthermore, electronic monitoring was found to be more effective for sex, drug and property offenders than for violent offenders (Bales, et al., 2010).

**Case Studies**

A number of states have already attempted to decrease their spending on corrections through the reduction of recidivism. These attempts have been based on the evidence based practices discussed above, and have seen a great amount of success. In the state of Texas, there has been a rapid increase in prison population over the past few decades. From 1983 to 1997, the Texas prison population had grown so rapidly that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice was forced to build 108,000 new prison beds at an expense of $2.3 billion to accommodate such a rapid influx of new inmates. Within ten years, the Texas prison system was inundated with new prisoners and had exceeded their capacity by 3,000 inmates. Again, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice sought to expand their prison system to accommodate more inmates at an expense of $523 million (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

An examination into the financially burdensome Texas corrections system found several troublesome areas exacerbating its high incarceration rate. Between 1997 and 2006, the number of probation revocations to prison increased by 18%. This is despite a 3% reduction in the number of individuals on probation. The state also reduced the funding for community-based substance abuse treatment and mental health services for released offenders, which subsequently resulted in thousands of people not receiving needed services to properly re-integrate into society. The examination also found that the percentage of people approved for parole by the state’s parole board remained lower than suggested by the board’s guidelines. In 2005 alone, 2,252 additional inmates could have been released on parole with little risk to the public, saving the state millions (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

As a result of this examination, the state of Texas decided not to expand their prison system’s capacity, but instead to try and reduce the high levels of supervision revocations. The state appropriated new funding for treatment programs for those with substance abuse needs. They expanded halfway houses and intermediate sanction facilities to help probationers and parolees re-integrate back into society and created 3,200 new spots for intensive prison and jail based alcohol and substance abuse treatment programs. The state also implemented new policies aimed at enhancing probation and parole by establishing a maximum caseload limit for parole officers to ensure appropriate supervision, reduced probation terms for drug and property offenders from a maximum of 10 years to a maximum of 5 years, established financial incentives for counties that created progressive sanctioning models for probation officers to effectively react to violations of supervision, and the state expanded drug and specialty courts to ensure minor offenders would receive treatment to prevent them from re-offending (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

The result of such policy implementations was very promising. Between 2006 and 2009, parole revocations were decreased by 29%, and probation revocations were decreased by 3%. The prison population initially stabilized until December 2008, and then decreased by 1,125 inmates through August 2010. It is predicted that the prison population in Texas will remain under operating capacity through 2015. These reductions in recidivism amounted to a net savings of $443 million in the 2008 – 2009 fiscal year alone as there was no need to expand the prison system’s capacity and there was a reduction in funding for contracted bed space for inmates that exceeded capacity (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

In the state of New Hampshire, the prison population increased by 31% over the decade spanning from 1999 through 2009, which doubled the state’s corrections spending to more than $100 million. Between 2003 and 2005, the state’s recidivism rate increased 11%, from 40% to 51%. Revocations for parolees stood at 43% of all admissions to prisons in 2009 and probation and parole revocations for conditions accounted for 57% of all prison admissions during the same year. Of those parolees that were revocated, 75% of their condition violations involved the use of drugs or alcohol. 22% of prisoners were being held a median value of 500 days past their minimum sentence for failing to complete prison programs or misconduct, which amounted to $20 million in additional spending (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

Like Texas, the State of New Hampshire sought to reduce their rapidly increasing corrections expenditures through reductions in their high rates of recidivism. They chose to focus supervision resources on high risk offenders by reducing the length of supervision for low risk offenders. They also adopted a policy allowing their probation officers to employ swift, short term jail sentences for minor violations. The state also implemented a policy that ensured non-violent offenders would not serve more than 120% of their minimum sentence (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). This would help ensure that low risk offenders were not being forced to remain in prison for unreasonable amounts of time, all the while consuming valuable corrections resources.

These policies were adopted in June of 2010. Therefore, it is difficult to make an accurate judgment on their effectiveness. However, the state of New Hampshire has projected by fiscal year 2015, parole and probation revocations are expected to be reduced by 40% and 20% respectively. The state’s prison population is also expected to decline by 646 inmates, amounting to 23% of the current population. The cost savings is estimated to be between $7.8 million and $10.8 million in corrections expenditures. The policies also avert $179 million in new construction and operating costs between 2012 and 2021 (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

These case studies illustrate the cost reductions that can be achieved by implementing evidence-based policies aimed at the reduction of recidivism. It is still too early to determine if the crime rates for these two states will increase, decrease, or remain stagnant in the face of a smaller prison population. Theoretically, at least, recidivism has been reduced; more inmates are completing treatment programs and the savings incurred can be spent on other state obligations, or even returned to the citizens, which should increase public safety and reduce overall crime.

**Policy Recommendations**

The policy implications of the above cited research are many. There should be further research conducted on the longitudinal effectiveness of the various strategies outlined above. There should also be further studies concerning the effectiveness of the above practices on various populations, such as juveniles. The information learned from such studies would arm policymakers with the proper knowledge to pinpoint what practices are best suited for what populations and subsequently tailor-make the appropriate policies or legislation.

With that being said, there are numerous policy implications that can be assessed within the scope of the current research. For instance, the four identified best practices of the national summit on recidivism should be implemented in statewide correctional policy immediately. These practices and ideals have been shown to help reduce recidivism and therefore ease the financial burden imposed upon states by rapidly rising incarceration rates. However, if only a few can be realistically implemented due to the already far stretched finances of the states, the reallocation of resources towards those individuals more likely to re-offend and the implementation of effective community supervision practices would likely yield higher reduction in recidivism without the cost of relocating services or conducting new research to determine more effective programs.

Currently, many states do not treat released criminal offenders differently based on scientifically supported criteria that demonstrate a higher propensity for recidivism. By simply shifting current resources to concentrate treatment and higher levels of supervision to those individuals that research has shown have a higher rate of recidivism, significant reductions in recidivism can be achieved. Determining which offenders are “high risk” can also be implemented with relatively little financial contributions as state agencies would only need to purchase a validated risk assessment tool and train their employees on its proper implementation. No further research would need to be conducted to develop a new tool as that burden has already been bore.

Thirty-six percent of criminal offenders were re-incarcerated within three years for a violation of their supervision. There is more than twice the number of individuals under some form of supervision in the United States than are in a brick and mortar prison. It is paramount that effective supervision strategies be implemented in order to reduce this number. Allowing supervising officers to impose swift and certain sanctions on their supervisees would be a great first step. Again, the financial cost of such an implementation would be rather minimal as the main expense would likely be the composition of an appropriate policy outlining the circumstances a supervising officer may impose sanctions and what those sanctions may be. Training supervising officers on the new policy would likely be the second largest expense, but could potentially be made up through the savings gathered from the lack of involving the courts and prison systems in revoking an offender’s supervision for technical violations.

When budget cuts need to be made in corrections, many times education programs are the first to go. As research indicates, inmates that participate in educational programs have lower rates of recidivism and can potentially earn high wages once they are released. By cutting these programs, correctional agencies are only pushing their expenses to a later date in the form of increased prison populations. Therefore, there are really no net savings. More likely, there will be net losses as those offenders who do recidivate that would otherwise not have had they participated in an educational program will likely recidivate more than once, expounding on the overall costs to the correctional agency. Furthermore, educational programs have been shown to cost much less than imprisonment. Estimates from New York State place the annual cost for providing a higher educational program to an inmate at $2,500; the annual estimate to imprison an individual stands at $25,000 (Hrabowski III & Robbi, 2002). Educational programs should be expanded, not diminished. Their benefits to both the state budget and society at large far outweigh their short term costs.

Social ties can have a significant impact on the behaviors of human beings, particularly criminal behaviors. The research indicates that inmates with greater social ties to their family, relatives, friends and community have a diminished propensity to re-offend. Many inmates do not have these strong social ties, which could be a contributing factor in their already committed criminal behavior. Correctional programs should be instituted to help develop these social bonds. As for those inmates who already have some level of social ties, it should be the prerogative of correctional agencies to maintain and foster these ties to ensure they are there to support the inmate upon release. Practices such as allowing an economical means of communication between inmates and their families, providing secure yet comfortable visitation environments, providing adequate parking for visitors, reducing bureaucratic barriers to visitation, encouraging community organizations to visit inmates and placing inmates in facilities as close to their homes as possible can all be employed to increase or maintain inmates’ social bonds.

The use of electronic monitoring systems can offer a huge cost savings over traditional imprisonment or supervision. Research also demonstrates an impact on rates of recidivism. Offenders on community supervision have higher rates of compliance and the financial costs to the state are about one sixth of imprisonment (Bales, et al., 2010). However, the use of electronic monitoring should be tailored for the populations that have the greatest reductions in recidivism. Sex offenders, drug offenders and property offenders have all benefited in greater numbers from electronic monitoring than other populations. It stands to reason that finances for electronic monitoring would be best spent on programs concentrating on these groups.

**Conclusions**

The last three decades have bore witness to rapidly expanding prison populations in the United States. This rapid increase has catapulted the U.S. to the title of most punitive nation in the world. The causes of this meteoric rise are many, but are largely fueled by incapacitation heavy legislation. With high levels of imprisonment come high financial costs to imprison. The rate at which these costs have increased has reached a level of insustainability. The answer to America’s crime problems cannot be incapacitation centered anymore. There must be a shift to combating the high rates of recidivism if prison populations are to be reduced while maintaining public safety.

By reducing recidivism, crime is essentially being reduced. A great deal of research demonstrates that the best predictor of re-offending is offending in the past. That is, the greater the number of an individual’s past criminal exploits, the more likely they are to engage in future criminal behavior. Therefore, if recidivism can be reduced, the overall number of crimes will decrease as well, netting an overall reduction in crime and an increase in public safety. There are many evidence-based practices and programs that are aimed at achieving this very goal. Strategies like assessing the potential of released inmates to re-offend and shifting supervision resources appropriately have been shown to be quite successful at reducing recidivism. Embracing educational programs for inmates, developing and fostering inmates’ social bonds and diverting certain populations to electronic monitoring for supervision are practices that have been shown to reduce recidivism, which in turn provides cost savings to correctional agencies and increased public safety to society.

Perhaps the most important effort any state or correctional agency can take in reducing recidivism is ensuring that systematic evaluations of their efforts are conducted. What works for today’s criminal population may not work in the future. Constant evaluation and re-engineering of programs and practices much be part of the correctional philosophy if longitudinal change is to take effect. There was a time when a reduction in recidivism was thought to be unachievable and increasing the incapacitation effect was the only reasonable means to control crime. New research disputes this notion. There is a growing body of knowledge that suggests reductions in recidivism are possible and its implementation is paramount in the coming decades as the financial burdens of the states become far greater than previously conceived. The public will not and should not stand for a diminished effort to maintain or increase public safety. The best solution to such a conundrum is to utilize this body of knowledge and achieve both of the goals once thought to be at odds. Reduce corrections spending while increasing public safety.

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