

Issue Brief: The Promise of Prisoner Reentry Programming

Recidivism among individuals released from prison is a central concern for local communities and the criminal justice field. Studies suggest that most Americans released from prison are re-arrested, reconvicted or re-incarcerated for a violation of supervision terms or commission of a new crime.¹ According to one federal study, 68% of former prisoners were re-arrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years.²

Mass Incarceration

The problem of recidivism is closely tied to mass incarceration. The U.S. saw an unprecedented rise in its rate of incarceration in the 1980s, largely related to the war on drugs.³ Since then, the U.S. imprisonment rate has outpaced every Western industrialized country by a large margin.⁴ Today, it is anywhere from two to ten times higher than that of other Western nations.⁵ However, state-by-state rates have begun to slowly decline from their peak levels in 2008, reflecting growing concerns that U.S. prisons are bloated.⁶

Mass incarceration has come under increased scrutiny over the past decade for at least four reasons. First, it has failed to deliver on its promise to curtail crime on a large scale. Research indicates that policing interventions seeking to reduce crime primarily through arrest and prosecution are ineffective.⁷ To the contrary, there is evidence that incarceration encourages re-offending.^{4,7} Second, the financial implications of mass incarceration have become increasingly intolerable. For instance, total public funding for prisons grew by 33 billion dollars from 1987 to 2007.⁸ Moreover, mass incarceration hinders local businesses by diminishing the labor force and consumer spending.⁴

Third, removing members from society in large numbers frays the fabric of entire communities. The economic vitality and collective health of neighborhoods suffer when a large proportion of male residents languish in prison.⁹ Fourth, incarceration takes a toll on offenders and their families. While in

Data from Milwaukee

North Side neighborhood¹⁷

Black male incarceration, ages 25-32: 42%

Black male unemployment: 50%

Adult poverty: 42%

Child poverty: 55%

Home ownership: 34%

prison, individuals often experience violence and trauma, re-entering society with PTSD and other significant disturbances.¹⁰ Children who see their parents cycle through prison are likely to incur a host of emotional and behavioral problems that predict their own incarceration,¹¹ and women with an incarcerated partner or spouse face significant stressors such as financial and relational instability.¹²

Reentry Programs

As the public's appetite for mass incarceration wanes, investments in alternative sentencing, diversion programs, and other efforts to reduce crime are growing. Reentry programming, which aims to decrease criminal re-offending and promote family and community integration, is one crime reduction strategy that is drawing considerable attention. Reentry programs provide individuals who are exiting jail or prison with an array of community-based services that promote employment and economic stability as well as positive family and community connections.

Successful reentry requires a comprehensive approach to community integration that addresses the root causes of crime and recidivism.⁴ Extreme poverty, limited educational opportunities, unstable household and community environments, and severe trauma often characterize ex-offenders' lives before and after periods of incarceration.

Reentry programs support currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and their families by facilitating access to health and mental health care, housing and employment services, parenting support, and substance abuse and addiction counseling.¹³

A recent meta-analysis indicated that reentry programs reduce recidivism by as much as 62%.¹⁴ The literature suggests that these programs have the best chance to be successful if they include the following elements: (1) delivery of pre-release therapeutic services during imprisonment; (2) provision of ongoing services for continuity of care after release from prison; (3) use of protocols to ensure program fidelity; and (4) involvement of participants who are at high-risk for re-offending.^{13,14} For more information, see: <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/>.

Focused Deterrence

Focused deterrence is a specific type of crime reduction strategy pioneered by the Boston Police Department in the 1990s. These programs are founded on the premise that if offenders are made aware of the consequences of committing a crime, and if they experience swift and coordinated responses by law enforcement, they will be less likely to engage in criminal behavior.¹⁵ After its implementation, Boston saw a dramatic reduction in violent crime.¹⁵

A meta-analysis of 24 programs found that focused deterrence was associated with a modest reduction in crime.⁷ Some focused deterrence approaches appear to be more effective than others. For instance, programs that relied too heavily on policing and prosecution tactics tended to yield poorer results, while initiatives that integrated law enforcement with social service and community-based programs had the greatest impact.⁷

Officials in Milwaukee are implementing focused deterrence strategies within a reentry context in order to decrease recidivism among offenders who return to areas where violent crime is highest, such as the Center

Definitions

Prisoner reentry and reintegration

refers to individuals returning to their communities after serving time in prison, a complex transition for ex-offenders, their families and communities. In 2011, roughly 1,885 individuals were released from state or federal custody per day.¹⁵

Focused deterrence are programs designed to prevent offending and re-offending, and when implemented within the reentry context, are aimed at reducing recidivism and promoting reentry. Combining law enforcement strategies with social service supports, focused deterrence communicate the consequences of re-offending while simultaneously facilitating need fulfillment, resource connection, and personal development.¹⁶

Street Corridor on Milwaukee's North Side. The Project Safe Neighborhoods: Welcome Home (PSN) is a community-led reentry initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Justice that delivers comprehensive focused deterrence reentry services to men returning to the Corridor and nearby neighborhoods after serving prison sentences for violent offenses. A number of state and local partners are involved in the project, including the Wisconsin Department of Justice, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, the Alma Center, the Medical College of Wisconsin, and the Institute for Child and Family Well-Being. In addition to reducing re-offending, PSN aims to promote participants' successful re-integration into the community.¹⁴

Project Safe Neighborhoods: Welcome Home

PSN adheres to promising and best practices by combining focused deterrence strategies with community-based services. The program communicates the legal consequences of re-offending through notification letters delivered to participants at a meeting with justice officials and community leaders; moreover, after the letters are distributed, meeting attendees sit in a circle to consider and discuss the effects of violence in their lives. In addition, PSN provides access to mental health assessments and referral

services, one-on-one case management, employment assistance, and other trauma-informed and healing-centered supports. After participants complete assessments at intake, they work with a case manager to overcome barriers to successful reentry and establish long-term goals.¹⁴ The PSN model also includes a Welcome Home Ceremony. The lead PSN service agency, the Alma Center, hosts these events in which participants network with prominent community members.

From 2017 to 2018, PSN served notification letters to 135 men, all of whom were offered assessment, case management, and referral services along with an opportunity to participate in the Welcome Home Ceremony. Most of the men reported significant trauma along with many social and economic obstacles to successful reentry. Many also reported that support from their case manager helped them overcome emotional and practical barriers to success. With additional funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, the PSN project has been expanded through a new focused deterrence reentry initiative: Smart Reentry. This program introduces pre-release services to the Milwaukee reentry initiative along with other elements of promising reentry programs such as family-based and peer mentor services.

Conclusion

As prison populations shrink, the individual-, family-, and community-level need for reentry initiatives is growing. Although the evidence on reentry programs is still emerging, early insights from the field suggest that the following program features warrant replication: (1) pre-release services that include mental health care, (2) post-release services that integrate focused deterrence with comprehensive community supports across agencies, (3) strengths-based approaches that include a focus on long-term goals, and (4) programs targeting offenders at highest risk for recidivism. The PSN and Smart Reentry models reflect these critical service components and approaches, and represent promising pilot projects that can help promote the well-being of the community and advance the field of criminal justice. Further investments in cross-system community programming and rigorous outcome evaluations in Milwaukee and beyond are needed to provide definitive recommendations about which reentry models work best and for whom.

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