

New York Times Article on Recidivism
Prison Boom Has Not Deterred Crime, Report Suggests
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By FOX BUTTERFIELD / The New York Times

Despite the prison-construction boom of recent years, the rate at which inmates released from prison committed new crimes actually rose from 1983 to 1994, suggesting that the increased number of criminals put behind bars has not been an effective deterrent to crime, according to a Justice Department study released today.

The study found that 67 percent of inmates released from state prisons in 1994 committed at least one serious new crime within three years. That is a re-arrest rate 5 percent higher than for inmates released in 1983.

“The main thing this report shows is that our experiment with building lots more prisons as a deterrent to crime has not worked,” said Joan Petersilia, a professor of criminology at the University of California at Irvine and an expert on parole.

A major reason that putting more people behind bars has not been an effective deterrent, Professor Petersilia said, is that state governments -- in an effort to look tougher on crime and to save money -- cut back on rehabilitation programs, like drug treatment, vocational education and classes to prepare for life outside prison.

About 15 percent of state prison inmates are currently enrolled in academic or rehabilitation classes, Professor Petersilia said.

Criminologists generally agree that the prison binge of the last 25 years, in which the number of Americans incarcerated quadrupled to almost two million, has helped reduce the crime rate, but largely by simply keeping criminals off the streets. But there has been debate about whether longer sentences and the increase in the number of prisoners have also helped deter people from committing crimes. The new report suggests that the answer is no.

Jeremy Travis, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, said the report showed that “the population getting out of prison continues to pose a high risk of re-offending.” This is true, at least in part, Mr. Travis said, because state departments of correction, with a few exceptions like Oregon, have done a poor job of managing the critical period when an inmate is released.

Often, Mr. Travis said, inmates are dropped off in the middle of the night at a remote bus stop. Their families are not notified. The police are not notified. And the prisoners have been given little or no job training, drug treatment or education in how to be a better parent. Many are unable to find jobs and are barred by law from living in public housing projects, so they easily return to crime as a way to make a living, said Mr. Travis, a former director of the National Institute of Justice and deputy police commissioner in New York City.

The report indicates that the first year after an inmate is released is critical to his or her success in returning to civilian life. For example, the study found that two-thirds of the inmates who were rearrested were arrested within 12 months of release. In addition, the study found that the number of times a prisoner had been arrested was the best predictor of whether he would commit more crimes after being released and how quickly he would return to his criminal ways.

Prisoners who have one prior arrest have a 40.6 percent recidivism rate three years after being released, the study said. With two prior arrests, the re-arrest rate within three years climbs to 47.5 percent. With three prior arrests, it rises to 55.2 percent.

Then, with each additional prior arrest, it continues to rise, reaching a re-arrest rate of 82.1 percent for inmates with more than 15 prior arrests. Prisoners with a greater history of previous arrests are likely to be rearrested faster. Prisoners with one prior arrest have a 21 percent re-arrest rate within a year of their release. But inmates with 16 or more prior arrests have a 74 percent recidivism rate within the first year after their release, the study found.

The report was prepared for the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the statistical branch of the Justice Department, by Patrick Langan and David Levin. It is the first major study of recidivism in more than a decade. The study examined 272,111 former inmates in 15 states during the first three years after their release.

Professor Petersilia said the major finding about the recidivism rate being 67.5 percent within three years was particularly striking because earlier studies, dating to the 1960's, have all found that re-arrest rates of American prisoners come out at about two-thirds within those first three years after release.

These findings have occurred even as the prison philosophy has shifted from rehabilitation to get-tough-on-crime to deterrence, with seemingly little difference in the outcome.