



Lessons Learned about Reducing Recidivism from Research on Correctional and Juvenile Delinquency Programs

by David B. Wilson, Ph.D., George Mason University, October 2009

Correctional programs in the United States serve several goals, including doling out punishment for crimes committed. One important goal embodied in the very name, corrections, is the reduction of the likelihood that a juvenile delinquent or adult offender will continue to engage in criminal behavior. This goal may be pursued through punitive sanctions intended to deter a specific offender from future criminal acts or through rehabilitative programs designed to facilitate positive change in an individual. With over 600,000 inmates released from prisons and jails each year and over 7.3 million under the supervision of the criminal justice system at any one time, the problem of recidivism or repeated criminal offending is a major concern for the general public and policy makers. The focus of the briefing is to summarize in general terms lessons learned from over a half a century of research about effective correctional programming.

Hundreds of research studies have examined the effectiveness of various sanctions and rehabilitative programs. Drawing from my work and that of other scholars working in the area, Lipsey and Cullen (2007) summarized the dozens of meta-analyses and systematic reviews that have synthesized, categorized, and evaluated the results from these hundreds and studies. Although there are still many unanswered questions, several clear patterns of effects have emerged.

First, systematic reviews that have examined the effectiveness of punitive sanctions to deter the specific offenders on whom they are imposed find no benefit in these approaches. An examination of the evidence on prisons and jails versus a community sanction found no difference in recidivism (Killias et al. 2008). Similarly, the evidence on lengthening prison sentences, although methodologically problematic, finds increased recidivism for the longer sentences (Smith et al. 2002). Correctional boot-camps also fail to deliver. The recidivism rates for offenders released from boot-camps are comparable to those released from prison (MacKenzie et al. 2001; Wilson et al. 2005). The evidence is less clear on the value of increasing the intensiveness of supervision, such as intensive probation and parole (Lipsey & Cullen 2007). Overall, the current research evidence suggests that merely increasing the punitive nature of sanctions does not reduce future offending.

Second, rehabilitative programs designed to facilitate offender change generally show positive effects, although there is great variability across programs. For example, drug-courts (Wilson et al. 2006), and prison-based drug treatment programs (Mitchell et al. 2007) have both been shown to reduce future offending. Similarly, research supports the benefits of prison-based work, education, and vocational programs (Wilson et al. 2000). Cognitive-behavioral programs that address the dysfunctional thought processes of offenders also show evidence of effectiveness (Landenberger & Lipsey 2005; Wilson et al. 2005) as do interpersonal skills programs for juveniles (Lipsey & Wilson 1998) and relapse prevention programs for juveniles and adults (Dowden et al. 2003). The effects of these programs range from small to as large as a 40% decrease in recidivism.

Third, the existing research points to several principles for effective programming. The first is focusing on what Andrews and colleagues have labeled criminogenic needs (Andrews et al., 2006; Latessa et al. 2002). These are malleable features of offenders that contribute to criminal behavior, such as antisocial attitudes, substance abuse, low self-control, etc. The second is targeting high-risk offenders. Research has consistently found larger effects for high-risk offenders (e.g., Andrews et al., 1990). This may reflect that they have more room for improvement or that they are in greatest need for the types of

services offered. Third, programs must be implemented well. Even evidence-based programs have limited potential to effect change if poorly implemented. Research suggests that highly structured and manualized programs have an advantage in this regard.

The good news is that there are programs and correctional practices that can reduce offending among those involved in the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, as Lipsey and Cullen (2007) point out, the current mix of programs available in our criminal justice system do not reflect best-practices. We still have a lot to learn about how to take evidence-based practices and translate them into widely implemented programs while retaining the essential elements of effectiveness.

References

- Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, J. S. (2006). The recent past and near future of risk and/or need assessment. *Crime and Delinquency*, 52(1), 7.
- Andrews, D. A., Zinger, I., Hoge, R. D., Bonta, J., Gendreau, P., & Cullen, F. T. (1990). Does Correctional Treatment Work? A Clinically Relevant and Psychologically Informed Meta-Analysis. *Criminology*, 28(3), 369-404.
- Dowden, C., Antonowicz, D., & Andrews, D. A. (2003). The Effectiveness of Relapse Prevention with Offenders: A Meta-Analysis. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 47(5), 516-528.
- Killias, M., & Villettaz, P. (2008). The effects of custodial vs. non-custodial sanctions on reoffending: Lessons from a systematic review. *Psicothema*, 20(1), 29-34.
- Landenberger, & Lipsey. (2005). The positive effects of cognitive-behavioral programs for offenders: A meta-analysis of factors associated with effective treatment. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 1(4), 451-476.
- Lipsey, M. W., & Cullen, F. T. (2007). The Effectiveness of Correctional Rehabilitation: A Review of Systematic Reviews. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 3, 297-320.
- Lipsey, M. W., & Wilson, D. B. (1998). Effective intervention for serious juvenile offenders: A synthesis of research. In R. Loeber & D. P. Farrington (Eds.), *Serious & Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions* (pp. 313-345). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- Mackenzie, D. L., Wilson, D. B., & Kider, S. B. (2001). Effects of Correctional Boot Camps on Offending. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 578(1), 126-143.
- Mitchell, O., Wilson, D. B., & MacKenzie, D. L. (2007). Does incarceration-based drug treatment reduce recidivism? A meta-analytic synthesis of the research. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 3(4), 353-375.
- Smith, P., Goggin, C., & Gendreau, P. (2002). The effects of prison sentences and intermediate sanctions on recidivism: General effects and individual differences. Public Works and Government Services, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.sgc.gc.ca>.
- Wilson, D., Mitchell, O., & MacKenzie, D. (2006). A systematic review of drug court effects on recidivism. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 2(4), 459-487.
- Wilson, D. B., Bouffard, L. A., & Mackenzie, D. L. (2005). A Quantitative Review of Structured, Group-Oriented, Cognitive-Behavioral Programs for Offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 32(2), 172-204.
- Wilson, D. B., Gallagher, C. A., & MacKenzie, D. L. (2000). A Meta-Analysis of Corrections-Based Education, Vocation, and Work Programs for Adult Offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 37(4), 347-368.
- Wilson, D. B., MacKenzie, D. L., & Mitchell, F. N. (2005). *The effects of correctional boot camps on offending*. Campbell Systematic Reviews. The Campbell Collaboration. Retrieved from <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>.