



WISCONSIN FAMILY IMPACT SEMINARS

Briefing Report - Executive Summary



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Looking Beyond the Prison Gate

NEW DIRECTIONS IN PRISONER REENTRY

The iron law of incarceration is that nearly all prisoners come back—to their families and communities. In FY 2006, over 14,500 prisoners were released from Wisconsin prisons. This means that the population returned to society last year was similar in size to Bayfield County, the city of Menomonie, or the combined student bodies of UW-Stevens Point and UW-Green Bay. After being behind bars an average of 10 years, many prisoners have difficulty with the most basic requirements of life outside prison, such as finding a steady job, locating housing, and reestablishing positive relationships with family and friends. This report examines the latest evidence on how reentry policy can keep the public safe by better preparing prisoners for their inevitable return.

The first chapter is written by **Jeremy Travis**, president of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York. Sentencing policy in the United States has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. During this time, U.S. incarceration rates quadrupled (largely due to drug offenses) and corrections budgets have become the second fastest growing state expenditure. More offenders entering prison means that more prisoners will eventually leave and return to their families and communities. Yet returning prisoners face a number of challenges in their family relationships, work, health, and housing. Many have a low level of human capital; for example, the longest that half of them have held a job is two years. Two-thirds of released prisoners end up being rearrested for a new offense within three years, and one-quarter are returned to prison for a new conviction. To turn these numbers around, new policy directions include a) reinventing supervision by front-loading services to ex-prisoners during the first six months

after their release, the time they are most likely to commit a new crime, and b) establishing reentry courts to provide appropriate sanctions and incentives for successful reintegration.

The next chapter on designing reentry programs is written by **Edward Latessa**, professor and division head in the Division of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. Successful prisoner reentry programs have garnered public support because of their potential to reduce recidivism and save taxpayer dollars. To be effective, reentry programs must apply the four principles of effective corrections interventions. First, programs should be targeted to high-risk offenders. Placing low-risk offenders in intensive programs might actually increase their recidivism rates. Second, programs should focus on crime-producing factors such as antisocial attitudes and substance abuse. Boot camp programs are ineffective because they target factors unrelated to crime, model aggressive behavior, and bond criminals together. Third, programs should use a cognitive-behavioral approach, which has been shown to reduce reoffenses by an average of 10%. This action-oriented approach teaches prisoners new skills through modeling, practice, and reinforcement. Fourth, for model programs to be effective, implementation must closely replicate the original design; poorly implemented programs can do more harm than good. Given budget deficits, other states may follow Oregon's lead in requiring all programs for offenders to be evidence-based.

The third chapter by **Christina Carmichael** and **Jere Bauer, Jr.** of the **Legislative Fiscal Bureau** describes prisoner reentry programs in Wisconsin. The reentry process begins at the time of sentencing. For felony offenses, except those punishable by life imprisonment, felons receive a

A complimentary copy of the full report is available to state legislators by calling Heidi Normandin at (608) 262-5779. You can also download the report at no charge from http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/s_wifis26report.pdf.

bifurcated sentence. The judge specifies the time to be spent in (a) prison and (b) the community on extended supervision. Reentry services assist prisoners in transitioning back into the community through programs provided to inmates in prison and to offenders under community supervision who need assistance with housing, job readiness, and access to services. As of July 2007, Wisconsin correctional institutions had 22,729 inmates, and community corrections served 55,879 offenders on probation and 17,084 on parole or extended supervision. Upon admission, an assessment identifies the offender's individual needs for services such as cognitive intervention, education, employment training, medical care, and sex offender treatment. For example, almost half of adult inmates lack a high school diploma or GED and, when admitted, about two thirds have alcohol and drug abuse problems. The portion of inmate spending allocated to reentry programming is not available; however, \$123.7 million is spent for probation, parole, and extended supervision in the community and \$24.8 million to purchase community services for offenders.

The **Family Impact Seminars** encourages policymakers to consider how families are affected by problems and whether policies would be more effective if families were part of the solution. This report details a number of ways that families are affected by prisoner reentry. In the U.S., two-thirds of female inmates and one-half of male inmates are parents. When one parent is incarcerated, the children left behind are at risk of unhealthy development. The remaining family members also face financial stress and strain from the separation.

When prisoners return home, the family can be central to the reentry process. Of course, not all families are in a position to help or want to help. Yet in one study, 90% of former prisoners "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their family had been supportive in the first few months after their release. Former prisoners who felt that their family was a source of support had more success finding a job and staying off drugs. In fact, continuing contact with family members during and following incarceration can reduce recidivism and foster reintegration. As critical as this support is, it often comes at a price for families, many of whom are fragile.

For families to serve as a cornerstone of successful prisoner reentry, policies should take family needs into account. For example, policymakers could enact programs that strengthen families who, in turn, will support the returning prisoner. Policymakers could also examine the state's statutes, policies, and practices that may interfere with successful prisoner reentry and disadvantage their families. Some of these are summarized in a table prepared by the **Wisconsin Department of Corrections**. Corrections agencies could improve visitation policies; make it easier to maintain phone, video, or Internet contact; and expand the definition of family to allow visitation by girlfriends or boyfriends who are sometimes raising the prisoner's children. Schools, youth organizations, and agencies that serve families could take into account the special challenges families face when a parent or partner enters into or returns from prison.

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