

Pew Finds Four in 10 Offenders Return to Prison Within Three Years

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Washington, DC - 04/12/2011 - Despite massive increases in state spending on prisons, America's national recidivism rate is stubbornly high, with more than four in 10 offenders returned to state prison within three years of their release, according to a new report by the Pew Center on the States. *State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons* found that while the overall figures are discouraging, several states have made significant progress in reducing recidivism through a variety of evidence-based strategies.

In the first ever state-by-state survey of recidivism rates, state corrections data show that nearly 43 percent of prisoners released in 2004, and 45 percent of those released in 1999 were reincarcerated within three years, either for committing a new crime or violating the terms of their supervised release.

Pew's findings have significant implications for policy makers struggling with painful budget choices. State corrections spending, driven almost entirely by prison expenditures, has quadrupled over the past two decades, making it the second fastest growing area of state budgets, trailing only Medicaid. Total state spending on corrections today is more than \$50 billion a year.

"There's been an enormous escalation in prison spending but a barely noticeable impact on the national recidivism rate," said Adam Gelb, director of the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States. "Some states like Texas have begun to shift dollars into strategies for nonviolent offenders that cost less than prison and are more effective at stopping the revolving door. These troubling national figures should accelerate the trend toward policies that will give taxpayers a better public safety return on their massive expenditure on incarceration."

The Pew survey methodology differs from the last national study of recidivism rates conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 1994, which found 52 percent of released prisoners were back within three years. While differences in survey methods complicate direct comparisons of national recidivism rates over time, a comparison of the states included in both the Pew and BJS studies reveals that recidivism rates have been largely stable. When California, whose size skews the national picture, is excluded from both studies recidivism rates between 1994 and 2007 have consistently remained around 40 percent.

Recidivism rates vary widely among the states and there are a number of potential explanations for the differences. Many relate to whether corrections agencies are using evidence-based practices and to deliberate policy decisions, such as the types of offenders sentenced to prison, how inmates are selected for release, how long they are under supervision, and decisions about how to respond when offenders break the rules of their release. For this reason, readers should focus on differences within states over time, and probe for reasons why one state's recidivism rate might be higher than its neighbors' rather than make judgments about the performance of its corrections agencies based on this single indicator.

Of the 33 states that reported data for both 1999 and 2004 releases, recidivism rates fell in 17 states and climbed in 15 states, while one state reported no change.

Six states (Alaska, California, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri and Utah) reported that more than half of released offenders returned to state custody within three years in 2004-2007, while five (Oklahoma, Oregon, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming) had recidivism rates under 30 percent.

The number of ex-offenders returning for a new crime varied significantly from state to state, ranging from 44.7 percent in Alaska to 4.7 percent in Montana. Reported recidivism rates for a technical violation of parole were similarly wide-ranging, from 40.3 percent in Missouri to 0 percent in Arkansas, which sends adult offenders who violate the terms of their supervision to technical violator programs in lieu of

incarceration.

Looking at the change in rates between 1999-2002 and 2004-2007, Kansas, Oregon and Utah led the country in declining returns to prison, with Oregon reporting the steepest drop of 31.9 percent. Montana and Oregon documented the largest declines in recidivism for new crimes, while North Carolina, Ohio and Oregon reported the largest decreases in returns for technical violations of supervision.

Assessing a state's correctional performance requires linking recidivism rates with the specific policies and practices that impact the frequency of reoffending. The State of Recidivism closely examines how Oregon, Michigan and Missouri are thoughtfully putting research on what works into practice. Their stories help illuminate strategies that can cut reoffending and corrections costs.

According to the report, sustainable reductions in recidivism are achieved when states invest in evidence-based policies, programs and practices that target offenders upon admission to prison and motivate offenders to stay crime- and drug-free through a combination of swift and certain sanctions for violations and positive incentives for compliance.

The report shows a greater shift to evidence-based policies could produce a big payoff: If the 41 states that provided data for 2004 could reduce their recidivism rates by just 10 percent, they could save more than \$635 million combined in one year alone in averted prison costs. In fact, the state of California could save \$233 million in just one year by reducing its recidivism rate by 10 percent.

"Policies aimed at reducing recidivism offer perhaps the ripest opportunities for achieving the twin goals of less crime and lower costs," said Gelb. "State leaders from across the political spectrum are finding they can agree on strategies that do a better job of turning offenders from tax burdens into taxpayers."

The study, conducted by Pew in collaboration with the Association of State Correctional Administrators, was based on a survey of state corrections departments and is the most comprehensive study of state recidivism rates to date. Forty-one states provided recidivism data on prisoners released in 2004 and 33 states provided data on prisoners released in 1999. The responding states represented 87 percent of all releases from state prisons in 1999 and 91 percent of all releases in 2004.

ASSOCIATED REPORT:

Report: State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons