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Parole and Prison Reentry in the United States

Part II

Editor's Note: This is the second part of a two part article. Part one of this article appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of Perspectives. Citations for both parts are included at the end of the article.

V. Recidivism and Crime Committed by Parolees

The most common question asked about parole is, "Does it work?" And by work, most mean whether persons granted parole refrain from further crime or reduce their recidivism. Recidivism is currently the primary outcome measure for parole, as it is for all corrections programs.

A. Prisoner Recidivism Rates

The most comprehensive study of state prisoner recidivism tracked 16,000 inmates released during 1983 in 11 states. The study found that overall, 63 percent of inmates were arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor offense within three years of release from prison. In unpublished data from that cohort, Beck reports that 62.3 percent of those who were released "conditionally" (i.e., on parole) were rearrested within 3 years, whereas the figure was 64.8 percent for those who were released "unconditionally." About 47 percent of inmates were convicted of a new offense during the three years after release, and 41 percent returned to prison or jail for a new offense or technical violation of their prison release (Beck and Shipley 1989).

The Beck and Shipley study is the best available to approximate the recidivism rates of parolees, but it has some limitations. Not all persons released from prison were officially on parole, however, in the early 1980s most were, so this data captures most parolee recidivism. Also, the study tracked inmates for a full 3-year period after release, and offenders may or may not have been officially on parole for all of that time period. The study was also conducted more than 15 years ago, and we know that parole policy has changed considerably since that time. Unfortunately, there are no U.S. record keeping systems that record the recidivism of parolees, and no more recent national prisoner follow-up studies.

B. Successful vs. Unsuccessful Completion of Parole

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), as part of its National Corrections Reporting Program, does collect data each year from every state about its parole population and how many of its parolees successfully complete parole. This data derives from parole agency records, not from the police, hence it may not capture all arrests. It is possible for an offender to be arrested, (a misdemeanor or low level felony, for example) and not be violated from parole. The event is therefore recorded as a "successful exit" from parole.

This data reveals a disturbing trend in that a majority of those being released to parole will not successfully complete their terms, and the percentage of unsuccessful parolees is increasing. As Beck (1999) recently

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reported, annual discharges from state parole supervision reveal a sharp drop in the number of parolees who successfully complete their term of community supervision. As a portion of all discharges from state parole supervision, offenders successfully completing parole declined from 70 percent in 1984, to 44 percent in 1996 (see Figure 2).

C. Parolees and Other "Conditional Releases" Return to Custody

Such high parole revocation rates are one of the major factors linked to the growing U.S. prison population. Since 1980, the percentage of conditional release violators who had originally left state prisons as parolees, mandatory releases and other type of releases subject to community supervision, has more than doubled from 16 percent to 33.8 percent (see Table 5).

In some states, the figures are even more dramatic. For example, in California, in 1997, over two thirds (64.7 percent) of all persons admitted to state prisons were parole violators. By comparison, in New York, the figure is 23 percent. In Texas, the state most comparable in prison population to California, the figure is 23 percent. A recent report concluded: "There is no question that California has the highest rate of parole violations in the nation. In terms of total numbers, California accounts for nearly 40 % of all known parole violators that occur in the nation although it reflects less than 15 percent of the nation's parole population" (Little Hoover Commission 1998:23).

Table 5 - Percent of Admitted Prisoners, Who were Parole Violators, Selected Years

State	1980	1985	1992	1997
New York	24.1	13.8	13.9	23.0
Pennsylvania	19.6	26.7	18.6	33.4
Ohio	18.5	21.1	16.6	19.6
Illinois	20.3	29.9	19.7	30.4
Michigan	16.6	23.5	25.8	28.3
North Carolina	10.6	5.8	17.4	23.6
Georgia	8.2	18.3	25.5	23.0
Florida	16.0	6.4	12.7	12.2
Texas	15.8	30.9	39.9	22.7
California	20.7	41.7	56.3	64.7
Average (All 50 States)	16.09	22.3	28.6	33.8
Average (Federal Only)	11.09	12.9	/	9.0
Average (State and Federal Combined)	15.8	21.6	28.6	32.3

Note: "/" means not reported.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Correctional Populations in the United States*, 1980, 1985, 1992, and unpublished data from 1997.

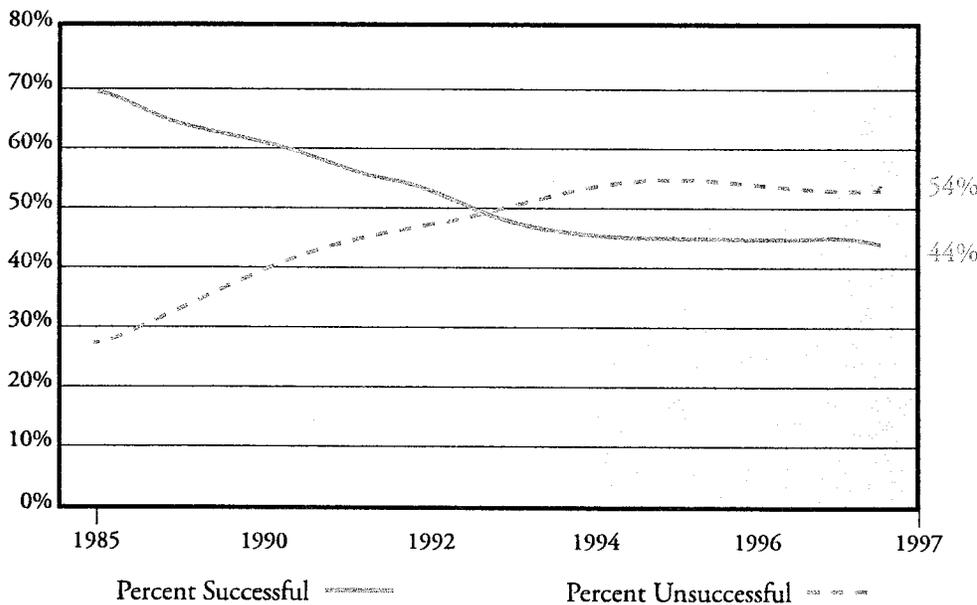
D. Contribution of Parolees to Crime

Another way to examine parole effectiveness is to look at the proportion of all persons arrested and in custody who were on parole at the time they committed their last crime. BJS conducts periodic surveys of persons arrested, in jail, in prison and on death row. This data show that 44 percent of all state prisoners in 1991 had committed their latest crimes while out on probation or parole (Figure 3).

Such high recidivism rates have led to the common perception that community supervision fails to protect the public and that nothing works. As DiIulio (1997:41) writes: "While formally under supervision in the community, these prison inmate violations included more than 13,000 murders, some 39,000 robberies and tens of thousands of other crimes. More than a quarter of all felons charged with gun crimes in 1992 were out on probation or parole."

Of course, it is important to remember that more than 80 percent of all parolees are on caseloads where they are seen less than twice a month, and the dollars available to support their

Figure 2
State Parole Outcomes, 1985-1997



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Annual Parole Survey*, 1981, 1986-1997.

supervision and services are generally less than \$1,500 per offender — when effective treatment programs are estimated to cost \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year, per client (Institute of Medicine 1990). It is no wonder that recidivism rates are so high. In a sense, we get what we pay for, and as yet, we have never chosen to invest sufficiently in parole programs.

Nevertheless, most view this data as showing that the parole system is neither helping offenders nor protecting the public and that major reform is needed.

VI. Reinventing and Reinvesting in Parole

As Joe Lehman, currently Commissioner of the Washington Department of Corrections, told the author:

"We have a broken parole system. Part of the problem is that parole can't do it alone, and we have misled the public in thinking that we can—hence the frustration, and the cries to abolish parole. We don't need to abolish parole, but a new model is sorely needed."

Interviews recently conducted with U.S. correctional experts reveal a consensus that parole needs to be "reinvented," (a term commonly used) and that the new parole model should incorporate at least four components:

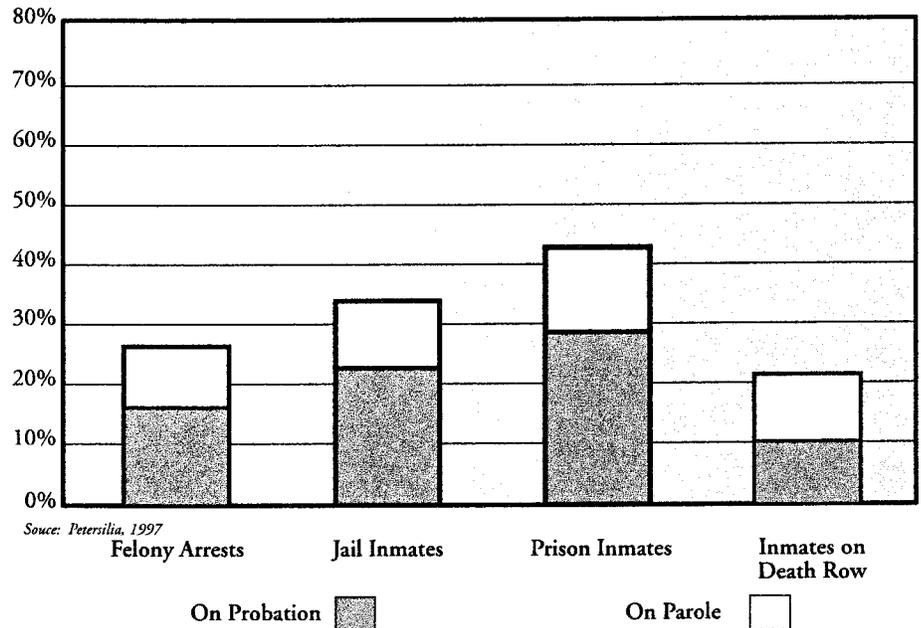
- 1) the identification of dangerous and violent parolees, for whom surveillance through human and technological means is a top priority;
- 2) the delivery of quality treatment (particularly substance abuse) and job training programs to the subgroup of offenders for whom research shows it could be most beneficial;
- 3) the establishment of intermediate sanctions and other means of diverting technical parole violators to community based alternatives and away from expensive prison cells; and
- 4) committing to a community-centered approach to parole supervision. This approach requires making a proactive commitment to managing offender risk in those neighborhoods where parolees live, and means forming active partnerships with local police, community members, offenders' families, neighborhood associations and other indigenous groups. Some refer to this as "neighborhood parole."

A. Greater Monitoring of High-Risk, Violent Parolees

There can be no doubt that the public, aided by private industry, will continue to demand and receive an increase in the level of control over certain violent, predatory offenders in the community.

The most visible sign of this is the expanded registration of parolees, originally begun for sex offenses, but now expanding in terms of types of crimes and how accessible the information is to the public. Connecticut recently expanded its parolee registration to include kidnapping for sexual purposes, public indecency and fourth-degree sexual assault. On January 1, 1999, Connecticut's entire list was posted on the Internet. Florida and New Jersey also allow citizens to have complete access to inmate

Figure 3
Who Is On Parole at Time of Arrest



release information through an Internet site maintained by each state's Department of Corrections.

A New York City-based crime victim's advocacy group, using information from the State Department of Correctional Services, now places on the Internet the names of inmates soon to be eligible for parole from New York State prisons. In addition to including inmates' names, criminal background and parole eligibility dates, the Internet site includes press clippings of the crime if they are available. The site encourages citizens to contact the New York State Division of Parole with comments.

In California, the State Department of Justice developed a CD-ROM database with the pictures, names and whereabouts of the state's more than 50,000 registered sex offenders. Visitors to any local police station in the state are able to type in their ZIP codes and find out if a sex offender lives nearby. When the data was first released, many local newspapers published the pictures and addresses of local sex offenders. Los Angeles County just announced that since few residents are using the CD-ROMs, they would begin mass mailings to residents informing them of the location and names of sex offenders living in their neighborhoods. As of January 1, 1999, California school districts will also have direct access to the CD-ROM and permission to distribute the information directly to the public.

New York and California both also have 900-number hotlines set up to allow residents to check if someone is a registered sex offender. Before that, it was illegal for a law enforcement officer to notify citizens about a sex offender living in the neighborhood.

Sophisticated technology is also assisting police and parole officers to keep better track of parolees once in the community. As the Cold War wound down, the defense industry, along with the developing computer and electronic industries, saw the community correctional clientele as a natural place to put its energies—a growing market. Electronic monitoring, voice verification systems, cheap on-site drug testing and

breathalyzers through the phone, all allowed community corrections the option of becoming more surveillance-oriented.

Since the mid-1980s, the electronic monitoring industry has continued to expand, and three states (Texas, Florida, New Jersey) now use global-positioning technology to determine when a parolee leaves his or her home or enters a restricted zone such as an area around a school or the neighborhood of a former victim.

These initiatives and programs are a far cry from the traditional social work approaches to probation and parole.

B. Delivering Appropriate Treatment and Work Training to Selected Parolees

The public seems to have isolated its fear and punitiveness to the violent, particularly sexual offender, and seems more willing to tolerate treatment programs for non-violent offenders, particularly substance abusers (Flanagan and Longmire 1996). Recent research reveals that the public favors both punishing and treating criminals, and their punitiveness tends to be reduced when they are provided with complex sentencing options and are informed about the high cost of incarceration (Applegate et al. 1996). A recent study found the public unwilling to tolerate regular probation for felons, but willing to tolerate, if not prefer, strict community based alternatives to prison when these sanctions are developed and applied meaningfully. For the crime of robbery with injury, for example, 50 percent of the respondents viewed a sanction between halfway house and strict probation acceptable. When the option of shock incarceration (prison followed by community supervision) is added, this figure rises to a full 63 percent (Sundt et al. 1998). The public seems open to tough community-based sanctions, and wants them to include both treatment and surveillance.

This softening of public attitudes seems to have resulted from knowledge about the high costs of prisons combined with emerging evidence that some treatment programs are effective, for some offenders, under certain empirically established conditions. This research has identified those principles that produce effective correctional interventions. The evidence indicates that well-designed and properly implemented programs incorporating these principles result in significant reductions in recidivism. The programs that are most successful include a strong behavior and cognitive skills development component (Andrews and Bonta 1994). Some of these programs have been effective in reducing the rearrest rates of parolees.

1. Drug and Alcohol Dependency Programs

A recent research summary of drug treatment effectiveness reported that a growing body of research shows that voluntary or mandatory drug treatment can reduce recidivism, especially when treatment is matched to offender needs (Prendergast, Anglin, & Wellisch, 1995). The most successful programs are based on social learning theory. These

"The reality is that more than nine out of ten prisoners are released back into the community, and with an average (median) U.S. prison term served of 15 months, half of all inmates in U.S. prisons today will be back on the streets in less than two years."

-Beck, 1999

programs assume that criminal behavior is learned, so they try to improve offenders' interpersonal relations through vocational and social skill building, peer-oriented behavior programs, role playing and interpersonal cognitive skill training. Effective treatment programs must also continue assisting the offender for several months after program completion.

A program that attempts to do this, with noted success, is San Diego's Parolee Partner-

ship Program (PPP), which is part of California's statewide Preventing Paroling Failure Program. The San Diego program, begun in 1992, provides substance abuse treatment for parolees in San Diego County. A private vendor operates the program using principles of client selection, managed care, case management, and case follow-up. The vendor subcontracts to provide outpatient, residential and detoxification treatment services and facilities. Support services (e.g., education and vocation training and transportation) are provided directly by the vendor or through referral to other community resource agencies. Typically, the time limit is 180 days of treatment. The participant is then assigned a recovery advocate who motivates the offender to continue in treatment for as long as necessary and keeps the parole agent aware of the parolee's progress. The program served about 700 offenders in fiscal year 1995-96 at a total cost of about \$1.5 million (about \$2,100 per parolee).

An evaluation of the program shows that the PPP was successful with its target group which was characterized as a hard to treat group, who on average had used drugs for about 11 years. The percentage of parolees placed in the PPP who were returned to prison was nearly 8 percentage points lower than the return rate for the statistically-matched comparison group, and this difference was statistically significant (California Department of Corrections 1997). Los Angeles County operates a similarly successful program. The success of these programs motivated the California State Legislature to increase funding for parole substance abuse programs in 1998-2000.

2. Employment and Job Training

Research has consistently shown that if parolees can find decent jobs as soon as possible after release, they are less likely to return to crime and to prison. Several parole programs have been successful at securing employment for parolees.

The Texas Re-Integration of Offenders Project (RIO) began as a two-city pilot program in 1985, and has become one of the nation's most ambitious government programs devoted to placing parolees in jobs (Finn 1998c). RIO has more than 100 staff members and 62 officers who provide job placement services to nearly 16,000 parolees each year in every county in Texas (or nearly half of all parolees released from Texas prisons each year). RIO claims to have placed 69 percent of more than 100,000 ex-offenders since 1985.

RIO represents a collaboration of two state agencies, the Texas

Workforce Commission, where the program is housed, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, whose RIO-funded assessment specialists help inmates prepare for employment and whose parole officers refer released inmates to the program. As the reputation of the program has spread, the Texas Workforce Commission has developed a pool of more than 12,000 employers who have hired parolees referred by RIO.

A 1992 independent evaluation documented that 60 percent of RIO participants found employment, compared with 36 percent of a matched group of non-RIO parolees. In addition, one year after release, RIO participants had worked at some time during more three-month intervals than comparison group members had. During the year after release, when most recidivism occurs, 48 percent of the RIO high risk clients were rearrested compared with 57 percent of the non-RIO high risk parolees and only 23 percent of high risk RIO participants returned to prison, compared with 38 percent of a comparable group of non-RIO parolees. The evaluation also concluded that the program continually saved the State money, more than \$15 million in 1990 alone, by helping to reduce the number of parolees who would otherwise have been rearrested and sent back to prison (Finn 1998c).

These positive findings encouraged the Texas legislature to increase RIO's annual budget to nearly \$8 million, and other states, Georgia for example, to implement aspects of the RIO model.

New York City's Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) project is a transitional service for parolees consisting of day labor work crews. Assignment to a work crew begins immediately after release from prison, and while it is designed to prepare inmates for placement in a permanent job, it also helps to provide structure, instill work habits, and earn early daily income (Finn 1998b). Most participants are young offenders, released from prison boot camp programs, and are required to enroll as a condition of parole. The descriptive evaluation of this program shows that young parolees associated with it are more likely to be employed, refrain from substance use, and participate in community service and education while in the CEO program.

3. Multi-Service Centers

The Safer Foundation, headquartered in Chicago, is now the largest community-based provider of employment services for ex-offenders in the U.S. with a professional staff of nearly 200 in six locations in two states. The foundation offers a wide range of services for parolees, including employment, educational and housing. A recent evaluation shows that Safer has helped more than 40,000 participants find jobs since 1972, and nearly two-thirds of those placed kept their jobs for 30 days or more of continuous employment (Finn 1998a).

Another highly successful program for released prisoners is operated by Pioneer Human Services in Seattle, Washington, a private, non-profit organization. Pioneer Services provides housing, jobs and social support for released offenders, but it also operates sheltered workshops for the hard-to-place offender. It is different from other social-service agencies in that its program is funded almost entirely by the profits from the various businesses it operates and not through grants. They place a priority on practical living skills and job training. Most of their clients are able to maintain employment either in the free market or for Pioneer Services, and the recidivism rates are less than 5 percent for its work-release participants (Turner and Petersilia 1996b).

There are parole programs that work. One of the immediate challenges is to find the money to pay for them. Martin Horn, currently Commissioner of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, suggests using offender vouchers to pay for parole programs. At the end of the prisoner's term, the offender would be provided with vouchers with which

he or she can purchase certain type of services upon release (e.g., drug and alcohol treatment, job placement, family counseling). Mr. Horn suggests giving \$2,000 in service coupons for each of the two years following prison release. The offender can then purchase the services he feels he most needs. Mr. Horn's cost benefit analysis for this plan for the state of New York shows that it could save about \$50 million per year—dollars that he says could then be invested in prevention programs instead of prison.

C. Intermediate Sanctions for Parole Violators

States are taking a new look at how they respond to violations of parole, particularly technical violations that do not involve, of themselves, new criminal behavior (Burke 1997). Several states are now structuring the court's responses to technical violations. Missouri opened up the Kansas City Recycling Center in 1988, a 41-bed facility operated by a private contractor to deal exclusively with technical violators who have been recommended for revocation. The pilot program proved so successful that the state took over operation and set aside a complete correctional facility of 250 beds for the program. Mississippi and Georgia use 90 day boot camp programs, housed in separate wings of the state prisons, for probation violators (for other program descriptions, see Parent et al. 1994). While empirical evidence as to the effects of these programs is scant, system officials believe that the programs serve to increase the certainty of punishment, while reserving scarce prison space for the truly violent. Importantly, experts believe that states with "intermediate" (non-prison) options for responding to less serious parole violations are able to reduce parolees' new commitments to prison, explaining the vast differences shown in Table 5.

D. "Neighborhood" Parole

One of the critical lessons learned during the past decade has been that no one program—surveillance or rehabilitation alone, any one agency, police without parole, parole without mental health, or *any* of these agencies without the community—can reduce crime, or fear of crime, on their own (Petersilia 1998a). Crime and criminality are complex, multi-faceted problems, and real long-term solutions must come from the community, and be actively participated in by the community and those who surround the offender. This model of community engagement is the foundation of community policing, and its tenants are now spreading to probation and parole.

This new parole model is being referred to as "neighborhood parole" (Smith and Dickey 1998), "corrections of place" (Clear and Corbett 1999), or "police-parole partnerships" (Morgan and Marrs 1998). Regardless of the name, the key components are the same. They involve strengthening parolees' linkages with law enforcement and the community; offering a full-service model of parole; and attempting to change the offenders' lives through personal, family and neighborhood interventions. At their core, these models move away from managing parolees on conventional caseloads and towards a more activist supervision where agents are responsible for close supervision as well as procuring jobs, social support and needed treatment.

The "neighborhood parole" model has been most well thought out in Wisconsin, where the Governors' Task Force on Sentencing and Corrections recommended the program. Program proponents realize neighborhood-based parole will be more costly than traditional parole supervision, but are hopeful that reduced recidivism and revocations to prison will offset program costs. In 1998, the Wisconsin legislature allocated \$8 million to fund and evaluate two countywide pilot projects (Smith and Dickey 1998).

VII. Concluding Remarks

Nearly 700,000 parolees are now doing their time on U.S. streets. Most have been released to parole systems that provide few services and impose conditions that almost guarantee their failure. Our monitoring systems are getting better, and public tolerance for failure on parole is decreasing. The result is that a rising tide of parolees is washing back into prison, putting pressure on states to build more prisons, which in turn, takes money away from rehabilitation programs that might have helped offenders while they were in the community. All of this means that parolees will continue to receive fewer services to help them deal with their underlying problems, assuring that recidivism rates and returns to prison remain high, and public support for parole remains low.

This situation represents a formidable challenge to those concerned with crime and punishment. The public will not support community based punishments until they have been shown to work, and they won't have an opportunity to work without sufficient funding and research. Spending on parole services in California, for example, was cut 44 percent in 1997, causing parole caseloads to nearly double (now standing at a ratio of 82-to-1). When caseloads increase, services decline, and even parolees who are motivated to change have little opportunity to do so. Job training programs are cut, and parolees often remain at the end of long waiting lists for community-based drug and alcohol treatment.

Yet crime committed by parolees is a real problem and there is every reason to be skeptical about our ability to reduce it significantly. Early parole research did not reveal any easy fixes, and the current parole population is increasingly difficult and dangerous. The public is skeptical that the experts know how to solve the crime problem and have increasingly taken matters into their own hands. Corrections officials report being increasingly constrained by political forces, and no longer able to use their own best judgements on crime policy (Rubin 1997). State officials feel that even a single visible failure of any parole program could readily become a political disaster for the existing administration. One notorious case was that of Willie Horton and the Massachusetts furlough program. The press often publicizes such cases to feed the public's appetite for news about the failure of the criminal justice system. Such negative news, and the fear of such negative news, often precludes any innovative parole reform efforts.

The challenge is to bring greater balance to the handling of parole populations by singling out those offenders who represent different public safety risks and different prospects for rehabilitation. The pilot parole programs described in Section VI are the first step, but it would help considerably if rigorous impact evaluations were always conducted. We don't know with any precision what impact parole has on an offender's recidivism, or what supervision conditions are helpful to the reintegration process.

It is safe to say that parole programs have received less research attention than any other correctional component in recent years. A congressionally mandated evaluation of state and local crime prevention programs included just one parole evaluation among the hundreds of recent studies that were summarized for that effort (Sherman et al. 1997). The author of this article has spent many years contributing to the evaluation literature on probation effectiveness but knows of no similar body of knowledge on parole effectiveness. Without better information, it is unlikely that the public will give corrections officials the political permission to invest in rehabilitation and job training programs for parolees. With better information, we might be able to persuade the voters and elected officials to shift their current preferences away from solely punitive crime policies and towards a sanctioning philosophy that balances incapacitation, rehabilitation and just punishment.

By the year 2000, the United States is predicted to have a record two million people in jails and prisons and more people on parole than ever before. If current parole revocation trends continue, more than half of all those entering prison in the year 2000 will be parole failures. Given the increasing human and financial costs associated with prison, investing in effective reentry programs may well be one of the best investments we make.

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