

PilotOnline.com

Prevent recidivism with smart policy

The Virginian-Pilot

© June 22, 2014

Building more prisons to keep more people behind bars hasn't reduced crime, and studies show that increasingly punitive sentences haven't led criminals to rethink plans to steal, assault or deal drugs.

But a new report highlights the efforts of eight states, including North Carolina, that found ways to curtail repeat offenses, save money and reduce the number of people in prison. By shifting focus from lengthy incarceration to rehabilitation - rewriting sentencing laws to allow flexibility, diagnosing problems and intervening in prison, providing supervision and mental health treatment after release - states found that the percentage of felons who returned to prison within three years of release declined between 3 percentage points and 6.9 percentage points.

Virginia wasn't included in the report, but it, too, has seen fewer inmates return to prison because of its increasing emphasis on long-term public safety. Of the prisoners released in 2009, Virginia Department of Corrections officials say 22.8 percent had returned by 2012. That's down from 26.1 percent of inmates released in 2007.

The report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center details eight states' shift in priorities, documenting work to lower the number of people committing crimes after their release from prison.

The center compiled policy and statute changes, crime and incarceration rates and the number of repeat offenders in North Carolina, Georgia, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Colorado, South Carolina, Wisconsin and Rhode Island. It compared three-year reoffense rates of inmates released in 2007 with those released in 2010.

North Carolina saw the biggest drop: 6.9 percentage points between 2006 and 2010. In 2009, state policymakers found that probation revocations accounted for half of prison admissions that year, and of those, 76 percent did not involve a new offense. "In 2011, policymakers enacted sweeping legislation focused on strengthening community supervision and reducing revocations," according to the center. "These improvements and resulting cost savings have enabled the state to close nine correctional facilities, fund 175 additional probation officers and support community-based treatment programs."

Connecticut saved nearly \$50 million by bringing inmates housed elsewhere back to the state. That money was reinvested in mental health and drug treatment, community services and other programs.

Federal grants established by the Second Chance Act of 2008 - which created the Council of State Governments Justice Center - were part of the incentive to rework state policies, but leaders acknowledged that high incarceration and recidivism rates were eating up huge chunks of state revenues.

They needed to find ways to keep violent offenders locked up and reduce expenses while ensuring that inmates being released didn't come back.

In Pennsylvania, the report noted, the system began providing more programs for substance abuse and mental health problems. It rewarded nonviolent felons with early release if they behaved well and participated in specific programs. It set up incentives for halfway houses, and gave bonuses to contractors if their clients didn't commit more crimes.

In the first six months after release, the rate of repeat offenses dropped.

Virginia's shift in corrections philosophy in the past few years has involved assessing inmates' risk of committing more crimes, as well as the causes of their criminal behavior, as soon as they're admitted. Before they're released, they go through training and education, have access to behavioral classes, set up a savings account and learn about community resources.

In Virginia and in these other states, repeat offenses have declined, fewer people are in prison, and crime rates have dropped. Those results mean cost savings - and fewer victims.