

9.15: Current Issues in Corrections- Reentry and the Future of Corrections

Reentry and the Revolving Door

Parole, as discussed in the previous chapter, has had mixed reviews. Overall, the effectiveness of parole hovers around 50% success. It is estimated somewhere between 600,000 and 800,000 parolees are on parole in any given year over the last 3 decades. Additionally, several hundred thousand are exiting parole in each of these years. This brings up questions about what happens to these individuals. The reality is that most of them will be rearrested. In one of the more comprehensive studies on recidivism, Alper, Durose, and Markman (2018) discussed the recidivism rate of individuals tracked over a 9-year follow up period. What they found was that rearrest occurred for about 70% in the first three years, and by year 9, 83% of the individuals released has been rearrested. Many of these individuals return to prison, hence the concept of the “revolving door” of justice. In order for reentry programs to be more successful, individuals returning to society need assistance to get back on their feet and stay on their feet. This includes items such as education and training, employment assistance to get a job, legal services, education on public benefits, and housing assistance. Interestingly, it appears as though many of the items here are the same items that many of them had deficits in that landed them in trouble in their lives before ^[1] That is – many of these items are those same predictors of offending that were discussed in the first section (known as the know predictors of recidivism). Unfortunately, it appears as though they are not getting these while they are incarcerated. Again, creating a cycle of release and catch again.

Situations and circumstances that compound these problems for many ex-offenders is the difficulty faced with trying to get a job once released. Over the last 20 years, there was an overwhelming push to include items on employment applications that asked questions about prior incarceration history. Not only were there questions about prior incarcerations and prior convictions, but many employers also have questions about ever being arrested. If an individual told the truth (which is what they should do), the reality is that their applications would be discarded, or overlooked for others without an arrest/conviction. If an ex-offender lied about it, and it was discovered during a background investigation, the application was certainly discarded. In either scenario, it became increasingly difficult for an individual to obtain legitimate employment.

This is also true on apartment rental applications. Again, when individuals would put down prior arrests, their applications would often be placed at the bottom of the pile. If someone were to lie about it, and it was discovered, it could be used as grounds for not selecting an individual for tenancy. Once again, society was making it difficult for ex-offenders to even function as a normal citizen, based on a sentence that they had served, which is when the punishment should have ended. Collectively, these items are included in the concept of collateral consequences. That is – items that are barriers to successful integration that are remnants of prior punishment.

Future Outlook of Corrections

Based on the major issues presented, overcrowding and reentry, the problems faced in corrections are not likely to go away anytime soon. We have seen an increase in the overall correctional population for years now. While there are some reductions in prisons, this is not likely to stay this way, unless changes are made. Additionally, while there is space for growth in the area of community corrections, the functions of CC need to be supported and done based on evidence-based practices if it is to be more successful. It too has limits, and without the support, it is more likely to be another failure. If it is not supported, then the prison population is likely to increase even more, due to the eventual placement of too many failures of individuals in community corrections. Most offenders are in need of some basic assistance to get themselves back to a functioning level in society, including addressing their education, their substance abuse, their employment, and general and mental health. Our correctional system needs to change its habit of treating substance abuse and mental health issues as legal and punish-oriented issues if we are going to curb the tide of the growing problems we face in corrections. If not, our 8 million individuals in all forms of correctional control can quickly turn 10 million. According to a 2016 report from the U.S. Department of Education (p. 13), “from 1979–80 to 2012–13, state and local government expenditures on corrections rose by 324 percent (from \$17billion to \$71 billion).” ^[2] Keep in mind that is taxpayer money. We are funding this issue. It is time to address these problems from a more holistic approach if we are going to see a change in our current correctional practices.

1. Alper, M., Durose, M. R., & Markman, J. (2018). Update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005-2014). *U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Statistics*. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf> ←
2. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/expenditures-corrections-education/brief.pdf> ←

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