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# The Complex Problem Of Offender Reentry

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We have all certainly heard and read a great deal about offender reentry. So what have we learned? First, the reality is that more than 95 percent of prison inmates will at some point return to the community. More than half of these released offenders will fail in making a successful transition back to the community and will return to jail or prison. Second, the concept that simply placing an offender in prison will deter future criminal behavior does not work. If it were only that simple. However, what we have learned from years of practice and the results of hundreds of studies, is that reducing recidivism is a very complex task that requires serious work on multiple fronts.

The first front is one that I think we are just beginning to tackle: we need to rethink who really belongs in prison. We need to be thoughtful about what we are trying to accomplish by placing an offender in prison and how long it will take to do it.

Once we know which offenders are deserving of imprisonment, we need to figure out what we can do while we have their attention to help them succeed. Here is where the research on effective intervention is very clear; it almost provides a roadmap. The first thing that should happen when an offender is sent to prison is that facility staff should

thoroughly assess the offender's risk to the community, particular criminogenic factors, and the responsivity factors that will help determine how best to address that offender's needs.

For years, most states have offered programming to the inmate population. Sometimes this programming properly targets the factors that research tells us contribute to criminality such as poor self-control, low levels of educational and vocational achievement, antisocial attitudes and values, and chronic drug abuse. But other times, people in the corrections field waste our very limited resources by making "treatment" available that does no good at all and, in fact, may make some offenders worse. An example of this is the still pervasive "scared straight" types of programs. We must have the will to put an end to feel-good and/or publicly popular programs that simply do not work.

It is also critically important for our staff to be educated on the criminogenic factors that must be targeted if we are to improve an offender's odds of success in reentering society. Also, staff must be knowledgeable about the most effective ways to deliver programming. The evidence tells us that the most successful programs are cognitive behavioral, meaning that one goal for all treatment is to get at the underlying think-

ing that causes an offender to behave in antisocial ways. I contend that for a prison system to be operating at optimum effectiveness, we must train our staff, all staff, to know that every interaction with an offender is an opportunity to teach that offender something positive.

While we are assessing and treating offenders, we must keep in mind that they come from a particular family and community, both of which may have contributed to the offender's criminality. We need to work collectively with other state and local agencies to both improve our communities and plan for the critical adjustment period from prison to the community. The Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiatives that are operating across the country provide good examples of how to do this. And if we are truly committed to making the public safer, we must have the will to break through the traditional bureaucracies, which by their very nature, resist change and make funding for all programs contingent on outcomes. We must also effectively engage the public (whose perceptions are often distorted by the media) in our mission; a mission that clearly goes beyond running safe, secure and humane facilities. This is an exciting time to be engaged in this important work that can make our communities safer for all. ♦