

# Iowa Results First: The Cost-Benefit of Corrections Programs

By Lettie Prell

The Iowa Department of Corrections is committed to evidence-based practices, and in the past has ceased operating programs that were not effective. Now, thanks to the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, the Department of Corrections has created the Iowa Results First Initiative and calculated the rate of return-on-investment for Iowa adult offender programs for each program area included in the model. Cost-benefit analysis is an economic tool that allows policymakers to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of programs and policies. This form of analysis allows policymakers to compare the monetary benefits of a program or policy against costs during a 10-year period. If the benefits outweigh the costs, a program or policy is considered cost-effective.

The initiative is a project of the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Results First is a cost-benefit tool for states that is capable of identifying criminal justice programs that represent prudent taxpayer investments. This article summarizes findings by three program areas: institutional programs, community programs for prison releasees and community programs for higher-risk probationers. Programs are ranked by two measures:

- Benefits minus costs: For a program that reduces future crime, benefits include both taxpayer benefits (the costs avoided for law enforcement, prosecution /courts and corrections custody/supervision) and crime victim benefits (such as avoided medical and mental health care expenses, property damage and losses and reduction in future earnings incurred by crime victims). Costs are compared to the customary approach,

whether it is incarceration, or supervision without the program; and

- Benefit-to-cost ratio: the amount of dollars returned in benefits for every dollar spent on a program.

Other factors of program costs and benefits:

- All cost data and benefit calculations are based on Iowa data;
- All statistics, such as benefits minus costs, are calculated during a 10-year time period and are expressed in 2011 dollars (i.e., life-cycle, present values);
- Taxpayer benefits are the state and local resources avoided as a result of a program that reduces future crime — to include arrest, prosecution/courts, jail and corrections custody/supervision;
- Crime victim benefits are the monetized value of avoided victimizations as a result of the program — for example, medical and mental health care expenses, property damage and losses, and reduction in future earnings incurred by crime victims; and
- Program costs are those above “business as usual.”

Analyses show that a vast majority

of the adult criminal justice programs administered by the state of Iowa yield positive rates of return-on-investment, meaning that the benefits outweigh the costs of operating the programs.

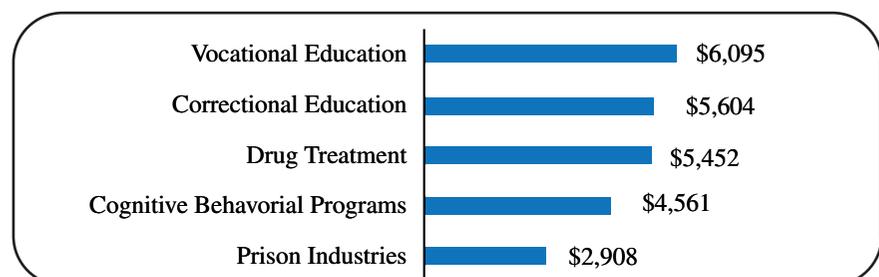
## Institutional Programs

Five institutional program areas are included in the Iowa Results First model: vocational education, correctional education (basic or post-secondary), drug treatment, cognitive behavioral programs and prison industries. Benefits for all of these programs exceed costs, ranging from \$6,095 per person for vocational education to \$2,908 per person for prison industries (see Figure 1). The benefit-to-cost ratios indicate that all five institutional program areas represent good investments. Cognitive behavioral programs are relatively inexpensive to run, returning \$37.70 for every dollar spent (see Figure 2).

## Community Programs for Prison Releasees

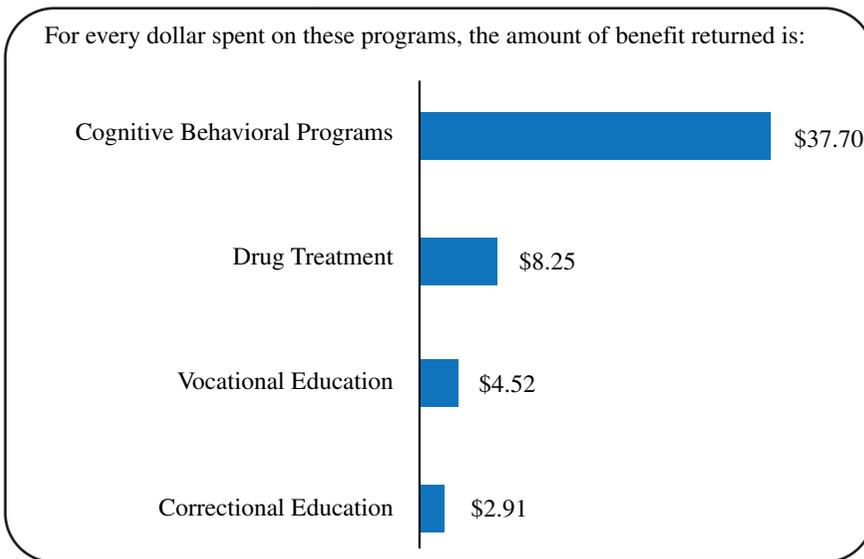
Seven community-based program areas included in the Iowa results first model are commonly targeted to offenders who are released from prison: intensive supervision using the risk/need responsivity (RNR) model, electronic monitoring, drug treatment,

Figure 1. Prison-Based Programs: Benefits Minus Costs



Note: Figures are per program participant.

**Figure 2. Prison-Based Programs: Benefit Return**



Note: Prison industries is excluded from this figure because no taxpayer dollars are spent on this category.

intensive supervision with treatment, work release, cognitive behavioral programs and employment training/job assistance. Benefits for all of these programs exceed costs, ranging from \$9,097 for intensive supervision using the RNR model, to \$2,168 for employment training/job assistance (see Figure 3). The benefit-to-cost ratios indicate that all of these community-based program areas represent solid investments. Cognitive behavioral programs are also very inexpensive to run, returning \$34.30 for every dollar spent (see Figure 4). The RNR model developed by Andrews, Bonta and Hoge<sup>1</sup> is based on three principles:

- Risk principle: An offender's level of service should reflect his or her risk of recidivism;
- Need principle: An offender's criminogenic needs should be assessed and targeted for treatment, with higher-risk offenders receiving the most intensive treatment; and
- Responsivity principle: The type of intervention should correspond with the offender's strengths and motivations.

The RNR model typically supports cognitive-behavioral or social-learning treatments.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of the RNR model shown in this article is based, in part, on research of offenders supervised in Polk County, Iowa, that

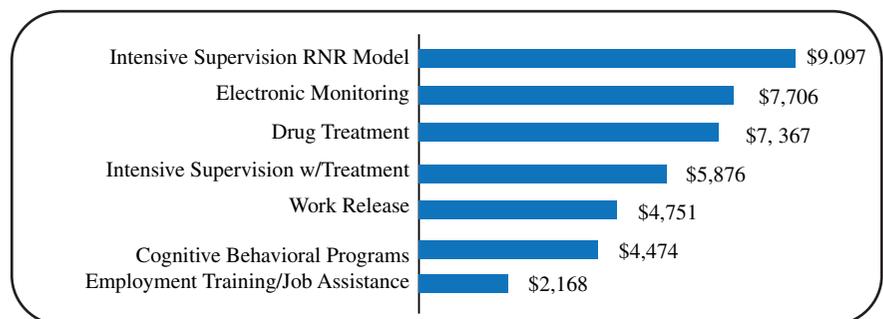
also included findings of an optimal caseload size in order to effectively deliver RNR. The research found that an intensive supervision caseload size of 30 offenders per officer (compared

with a caseload of 50 offenders) reduces overall recidivism by 25.5 percent for a new crime, and reduces the rate of recidivism for new property and violent crimes by 45 percent.<sup>3</sup> Iowa's intensive supervision programs all incorporate treatment. However, not all programs adhere to the RNR model or maintain the optimal caseload size.

## Community Programs for Higher-Risk Probationers

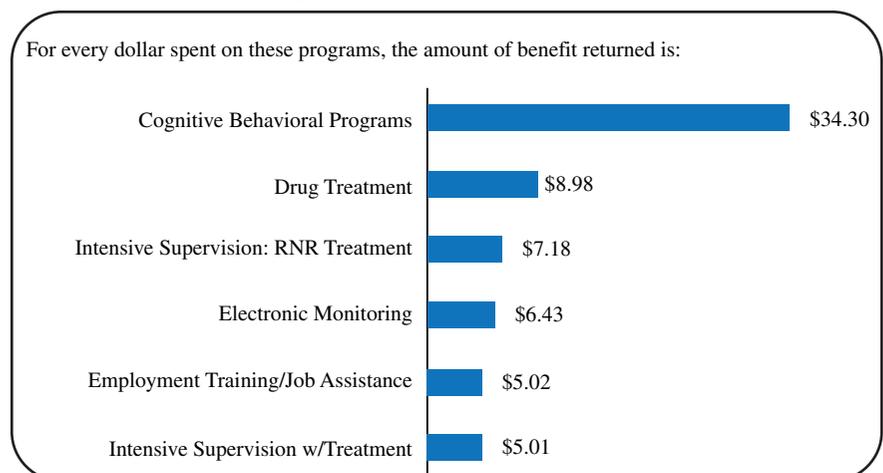
In Iowa, offenders not sentenced to prison normally receive community-based supervision. Eight community-based program areas included in the Iowa results first model are commonly targeted to higher-risk probationers: intensive supervision using the RNR model, drug courts, mental health courts, electronic monitoring, drug treatment, intensive supervision with treatment, cognitive behavioral programs and employment training/job assistance. Benefits for all of these programs exceed costs, ranging from

**Figure 3. Community Programs for Prison Releasees: Benefits Minus Costs**



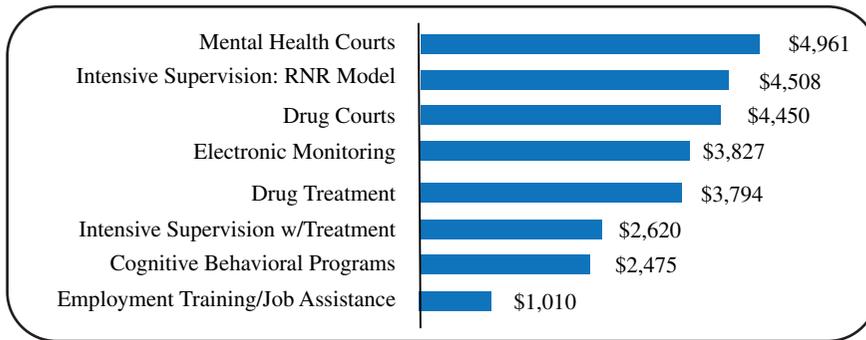
Note: Figures are per program participant.

**Figure 4. Community Programs for Prison Releasees: Benefit Return**



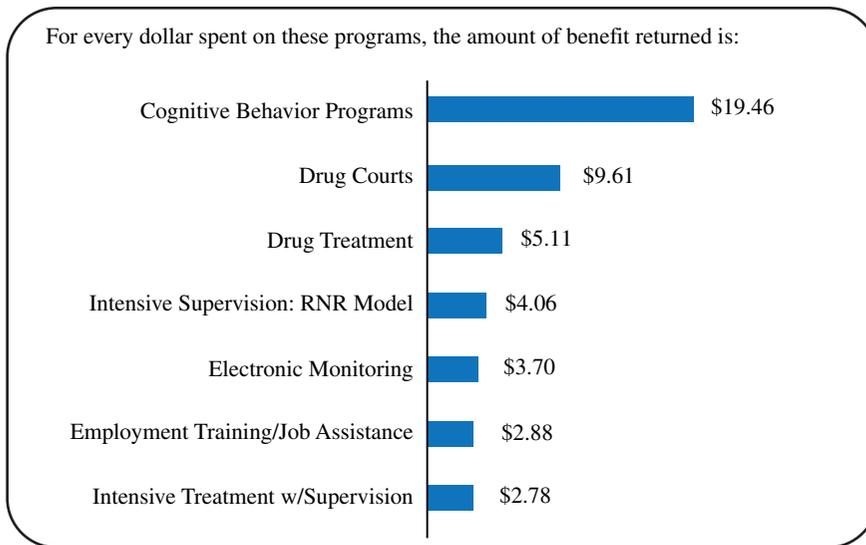
Note: Work release is excluded because benefit-to-cost ratio could not be computed.

**Figure 5. Community Programs for Higher-Risk Probationers: Benefits Minus Costs**



Note: Figures are per program participant.

**Figure 6. Community Programs for Higher-Risk Probationers: Benefit Return**



Note: Mental health courts are excluded because benefit-to-cost ratio could not be computed.

\$4,961 for mental health courts, to \$1,010 for employment training/job assistance (see Figure 5). The benefit-to-cost ratios indicate that all eight of the community-based programs represent good investments. Cognitive behavioral programs are also very inexpensive to run, returning \$19.46 for every dollar spent (see Figure 6).

Lower benefit-to-cost ratios for many program areas here for probationers compared to those for released offenders does not mean these programs are less effective in treating probationers compared with the latter. Rather, prison releasees tend to have higher rates of reconviction compared to probationers, so community corrections programs for prison releasees produces more benefits in terms of reduced crime. If

these programs are delivered to probationers who are assessed as lower-risk, fewer benefits to taxpayers — or no benefits at all — will result. For the Iowa results first model, higher-risk probationers were defined as those offenders who were supervised at the high-normal level of supervision or intensive supervision during at least a portion of their supervision period. These probationers are also the usual core target group to receive the treatment programs shown.

### Program Fidelity

These results are based on a summary of good, sound research evaluations, including those conducted on Iowa offender populations. Simply put, well-run programs — for exam-

ple, those that focus on specific factors that lead to continued criminal behavior, provide a dosage/duration of treatment based on risk and match treatment with offender characteristics — will achieve these results or better. Poorly run programs will not. The Iowa Department of Corrections has evaluated the degree to which institutional and community-based corrections programs adhere to evidence-based principles. Improvement plans are in place for a number of programs.

## Conclusion

Using the Iowa results first model, the Iowa Department of Corrections assessed the rate of return Iowa taxpayers receive from investment in the state's adult corrections programs. Findings indicate these programs yield positive returns-on-investment. Cost-benefit analysis is a powerful tool during these challenging budgetary times for states. Internally, it focuses the Iowa Department of Corrections on program fidelity and shifting resources toward expanding programs that both work and are economical, such as cognitive-behavioral treatment. The Iowa results first model also assists in providing budget decision-makers with sound information on the role corrections may play in further reducing admissions to jails and prisons, as well as keeping citizens safer.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrews, D.A., J. Bonta and R.D. Hoge. 1990. Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 17(1):19-52.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jalbert, S.K., W. Rhodes, C. Flygare and M. Kane. 2010. Testing probation outcomes in an evidence-based practice setting: Reduced caseload size and intensive supervision effectiveness. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 49(4):233-253.

*Lettie Prell is director of research at the Iowa Department of Corrections.*