

What Works to Reduce Crime, Recidivism and Prison Populations?

Seven Lessons Learned in Michigan that can Assist the Federal System

*Dennis Schrantz, Executive Director
Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, Center for Justice Innovation*

Written Testimony to the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections

March 11, 2015

Michigan has achieved one of the largest reductions in recidivism of former prisoners in the United States with an overall 18% reduction in returns to prison between 2005 and 2007 according to a September 2012 report from the Council of State Governments' Justice Center, *States Report Reductions in Recidivism*. According to the Justice Center, "... over a longer period, Michigan's decline in recidivism is even more significant, with a 28% reduction in returns to prison between 2000 and 2008." According to more recent data (2013) from the Michigan Department of Corrections, the recidivism rate improved for studied cohorts of offenders by 38%.

As a result of the improved outcomes of parolees, Michigan's prison population declined over 12% in just three years¹ - and continued to decline to 17% in five years - the steepest reduction in the shortest period of time of any state in the nation. Subsequently, Michigan has also led the nation in prison closings with an astonishing 21 facilities closed saving nearly \$350 million annually. Since the efforts to control and reduce the prison population began in 2002, it is estimated that cost avoidance for prison operations is nearly \$1 billion. (*On the Chopping Block: State Prison Closings*; The Sentencing Project; August 2011).

Michigan's accomplishments may represent the most rapid and massive decarceration effort in the history of the United States. And the crime rate has not increased².

While it may seem obvious that locking up more people would lower the crime rate, the reality is much more complicated. Sentencing and release policies, not crime rates, determine the numbers of persons in prison...Michigan has undertaken what may be the currently most effective changes to reduce incarceration in any of the states...As a Michigan Department of Corrections official bluntly stated in testimony to the Michigan legislature, these steps “have broken the political logjam that has consistently stymied many prior justice policy reform proposals,” by providing incentives for various stakeholders to support the initiatives and without requiring politically-sensitive reductions in statutory penalties for criminal offenses...

The history of over-incarceration in Michigan illustrates why the fact that over-incarceration results from deliberate policy choices about punishment rather than directly from crime rates is actually good news. As a persuasive body of evidence demonstrates, with an effective criminal justice policy, public safety can be improved, crime rates lowered, and our massive over-incarceration reduced. Michigan’s experience is important because it demonstrates that common sense can in fact beat demagoguery and that smart-on-crime policies can actually triumph.

Michigan Breaks the Political Logjam: a New Model for Reducing Prison Populations; National Prison Project of the ACLU; November 2009.

According to the Pew Center for the States (*State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America’s Prisons*; 2011) and other national crime and justice think tanks³, Michigan’s story is one of several in the nation where improvements in policy and practice, anchored in research and proven over time, can pave the way for other states to: “... *improve the odds that released offenders will reappear at the prison gate. That outcome benefits everyone, saving public funds and keeping communities safe.*”

Learning about what was behind these and other achievements⁴ is the subject of this paper which summarizes the most important lessons learned in Michigan on how to reduce recidivism. It is hoped that these lessons can assist the federal corrections system – as well as state and local justice agencies- achieve similar outcomes in improved public safety and reduced costs.

SEVEN LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE WORK:** Elected officials will ultimately make the decisions to allow executive branch agencies to act “tough AND smart” on crime issues. They need incentives and early successes. When focusing on crime reduction and fewer victims, working with offenders is easier to support.

- 2. FOCUS ON BUDGET & UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF REENTRY IN THE LARGER JUSTICE SYSTEM:** The work on offender crime and recidivism reduction is directly related to the national recognition that we cannot sustain the high levels of budget for corrections and we must reduce incarceration.

- 3. DEDICATION TO EVIDENCED BASED STRATEGIES:** It is impossible for major system reforms to take shape without highly disciplined strategic planning based on research based on evidence about what works that leads to implementation of targeted changes to policy and practice. There are four cornerstones to the work that has to take place collaboratively with justice and non-justice agencies:
 - Start with accurate offender risk and need assessment;
 - Focus on improved offender case management, driven by accurate risk and need assessment and work with one offender at a time to improve outcomes;
 - Implement “success-driven” offender supervision that stresses the role of the supervising officer as a coach rather than just a surveillance officer;
 - Focus on agency wide staff development and “change management” – not just training. Justice agencies must become Learning Organizations and embrace the need to learn new approaches to reduce crime and recidivism.

- 4. FOCUS ON “CORE AREAS” THAT CREATE SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM CHANGE:** Corrections and parole agencies are complex and it is difficult for leaders and staff to be able to effectively wrap their arms

around the myriad of issues that are needed for sustainable system change. Focus on specific “Core Areas” of functions that are critical to the ability to sustain reforms over time. If capacity and competency within the justice agencies is needed, use outside assistance to help provide the skills and time needed to execute the needed changes. These Core Areas include improving agency mid-level organizational structure, applying additional resources for staff, fully integrating policy and procedure, assuring internal and external collaboration, making certain the budget aligns with the magnitude of the changes intended, focusing on assessment, measurement and evaluation, fully engaging other human service agencies, and creating a robust quality assurance process. (For more detail on these areas, see Endnotes)⁵

5. Local Comprehensive Community Planning: Community leaders must own offender programs and be full partners in the process and this ownership should have explicit expectations for engagement. In Michigan, local Steering Teams were responsible for developing and reaching consensus in a collaborative manner on local, community-based Comprehensive Community Plans for both diversion from prison to probation on the front end and prisoner reentry on the back end. In order to be funded by the state, the local Plans had to address specific service areas such as housing, employment, substance abuse services, mental health, transportation, victim services, and the involvement of local law enforcement and faith-based institutions.

For each of these service areas, the Comprehensive Community Plan described the local assets in place to increase the potential for success for former prisoners, barriers that impede maximum use of these assets, gaps in services, and proposed solutions to address the barriers and gaps. Thus, the plan builds upon existing services and embeds their use within the context of comprehensive service delivery. Plans must focus on both policy and procedure that is critical to implementation: Who does What and When.

6. Local Management and Community Coordination: Local community coordinators are the essential staff to both local diversion efforts and the prisoner reentry process at each of Michigan's 18 regional sites as they are responsible for staffing the Steering Team and managing the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Plans. They coordinate and monitor the use of funds, the effectiveness of service delivery, outreach and education of the public, and collaboration with service providers, and justice system professionals.

7. Public Education and Outreach: Nothing could have been more important in Michigan to prison diversion efforts and prisoner reentry efforts than continual public education. Taxpayers must recognize identifying the need for services and provision of services as public protection strategies - not as "coddling convicts". This requires a disciplined dedication of purpose that must be carefully developed, implemented and managed. Local diversion and reentry steering teams comprised of elected and other officials offer many avenues to educate the public and special stakeholder groups.

Fundamental to full community support, for example, is the support of law enforcement officials such as chiefs of police, sheriffs and prosecutors who dedicate their careers to fighting crime. Their involvement in the local process as partners in the development and the execution of the Public Education Plan is essential to gain and sustain their on-going support.

ENDNOTES

¹ From 2006 to 2009 the prison population dropped from 51,577 to 45,478 – a 12% drop in three years. The decline continues today – through February 2013 the population has dropped by 17% (Michigan Department of Corrections).

² See Washington Monthly, November/December 2010, *Prison Break: How Michigan managed to empty its penitentiaries while lowering its crime rate*.

³ See, for example, *Downscaling Prisons; Lessons from Four States*; The Sentencing Project; 2010.

⁴ Michigan's successes on the controlling the front end of the system and reducing prison admissions preceded the work on prisoner reentry by over a decade. Beginning in 1990 when the prison admission rate was 32%, Michigan launched the Michigan Community Corrections Act under the Office of Community Corrections which eventually reduced the prison admission rate by 10% where it stands today. The lessons learned in this paper actually began in 1990 for prison diversion efforts which were adapted for the prisoner reentry initiative. While the national prison admission rate has increased, Michigan's has remained stable in the low to mid 20% range for the past 20 years largely due to the lessons described in this paper.

⁵ The Core Areas for capacity and competency attention include:

- **Mid-level organizational structure:** Justice agencies must have mid-level managers who are competent and capable of overseeing the facility, field, and community work required to improve offender success. High level leadership is critical but changes must come from within the existing management structure. Champions must be identified who are willing to get in front of the initiatives and help develop them and then guide them through the trenches.
- **Resources for staff:** All line staff must have the tools and resources necessary to improve offender success. Agencies must find ways to provide staff with incentives, rewards, technology, and training that will be required to conduct business in the new ways required by the system changes for recidivism reduction. Technology is critical to free staff to work more closely with offenders so that their attitudes and beliefs are adjusted.
- **Fully integrated policy and procedure:** Justice agency policies and procedures must eventually reflect that offender success and recidivism reduction is not just a "pilot" or "initiative" but is standard operating procedure. These reforms are not about programs – although programming is important – they are about fundamental changes in policy.
- **Internal and external collaboration:** Effective and strategic collaboration with probation personnel, prison staff, parole agents and community-based agencies will be key in determining the short, intermediate, and long-term success of former prisoners. Community, faith, law enforcement and victim leaders should not be an afterthought but should be brought to the table as equal partners in the process. Sustained and long term former offender success happens in communities, not in justice agencies.

-
- **Budget alignment:** To ensure that the allocation of resources is consistent with policies and procedures, justice agency budgets should be analyzed to determine if current expenditures are supportive of the new vision of improved offender success. Justice agencies budgets have plenty of funding and it isn't about finding more money, it's about spending the money they have more efficiently and in ways that are more effective at improving offender outcomes.
 - **Assessment, measurement and evaluation.** To ensure that justice agencies develop and implement new and innovative ways to measure offender success and failure, more resources need to be allocated to evaluating and implementing evidence-based practices such as risk and need assessment tools that drive case management and then evaluating their impact on crime.
 - **Engage other human service agencies:** State and local agencies outside the justice system should be represented on a state and local policy teams and included in efforts to promote offender success – especially when these agencies present barriers that work against recidivism reduction efforts. Offenders can only succeed when their needs are viewed holistically – planning and implementation committees and councils should reflect that. Leaders in housing, addiction services, training and employment, and mental health should be at the table.
 - **Quality assurance.** To ensure data drives decisions aimed at improving policies, procedures, and programs on an ongoing basis, justice agencies must develop and implement quality-assurance mechanisms that continually assess program fidelity, staffing efforts, and offender outcomes. This needs to be a formalized, fully resourced process.