Prisoner Reentry Policy Analysis  
Fall 2006

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Introduction

Allegheny County is a leader in innovations for solving the prisoner reentry problem and is one of the dozen or so counties or cities with research programs in the area that are members of the Urban Institute’s Prisoner Reentry Network. Systems Synthesis projects are active contributors to this research program and the Prisoner Reentry Network. For example, the Summer 2005 Systems team presented its findings to the Prisoner Reentry Network in a Web cast conference. Our clients are a working group of six area foundations called the Funders in Criminal Justice and a working group of the major stakeholders called the Jail Collaborative that includes the County Jail, Department of Human Services, and Department of Health. We build policy models that help in the planning and evaluation of prisoner reentry programs. Our efforts include field work to understand programs, data collection and analysis, and model building using statistics and GIS.

The Fall 2006 Project

This summer, the clients and Heinz School faculty will meet to develop a list of desirable project topics for the coming year. Students in the project will choose one or more topics for the semester, depending on the size and interests of the project team. Students select their project manager and the faculty advisor is an active member of the research team.

The Problem

The U.S.’s tough on crime policies have led to record numbers of persons being locked up in prisons and jails in this country. Consequently, there are also record numbers of persons being released from prisons and jails, after sentences are served. Over 50 percent of persons reentering society have drug or alcohol dependencies and nearly 20 percent have mental health problems needing treatment. All need housing, but the many who had lived in public housing are not welcome to return, and all need jobs, but are screened by policies of not hiring ex-offenders. Many ex-offenders quickly become offenders again. This is the prisoner reentry problem.

Policy Questions

In part, the solution is provision of human services. Every county government’s largest agency is its department of human services, as is the case in Allegheny County. Human services for returning prisoners include drug-and-alcohol treatment and mental-health programs and facilities, housing, and job training and placement. A major question has been if these services are well-placed and with sufficient capacity for concentrations of returning prisoners.

Another part of the solution is innovative programs that focus on treatment and intense court supervision for the worst repeat offenders. Drug, mental health, and DUI (driving under the influence) courts attempt to keep offenders in community treatment for extended periods of time with brief imprisonments as needed. Major questions have centered on the effectiveness of these programs on reducing recidivism, their costs relative to imprisonment, and their impacts on human services facilities.