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BEST PRACTICES, BETTER OUTCOMES

Improving Reentry in Florida:

Reducing Crime, Reducing Costs, and Transforming Lives

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Despite persistent declines in crime, Florida's incarceration rate has remained stable. One of the biggest drivers of incarceration is the revolving door of people leaving prison, reoffending, and returning to prison. The vast majority of people in Florida's prisons will eventually be released, but a lack of resources and available programming is limiting their likelihood of successful reentry into society.

This report describes the problems the state currently faces with correctional programs and offers examples of evidence-based scientifically evaluated programs that could be implemented to help reduce recidivism and improve reentry.

Recommendations include:

- Expand workforce training and opportunities for job skill development during incarceration.
- Adequately fund general education and higher education services.
- Develop evidence-based programs that promote positive relationships between people in prison and their loved ones.
- Expand substance abuse and mental health treatment programs, including programs aimed at cognitive behavioral therapy.
- Provide transitional services that continue to address needs from prison into the community.
- Fund and provide for a scientific evaluation of any program that receives funding from the state.

Best Practices

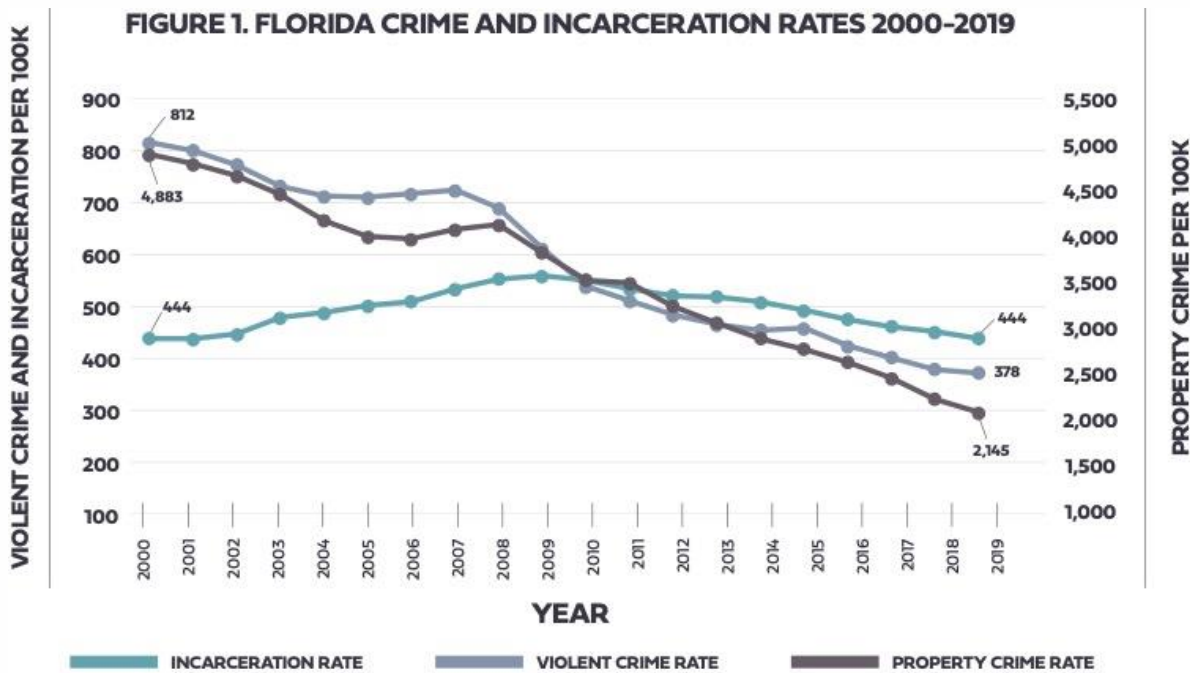
The following areas should be addressed to obtain best outcomes:

- Employment
- Education
- Substance abuse treatment
- Mental health
- Connection
- Transitional services

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Criminal justice continues to be a key issue for Florida’s policymakers. According to the F.B.I.’s Uniform Crime Report, (1) Florida’s violent crime and property crime rates have more than halved in the 20 years from 2000 to 2019 and continue to decline since. (2) Policymakers and taxpayers likely hope that a reduction in crime would be accompanied by an associated decline in the funds needed for the state’s correctional system. However, Figure 1 shows Florida’s drop in crime has been met with a stable incarceration rate. One reason Florida’s incarceration rate remains so high in the face of declining crime is that many of the approximately 25,000 people who leave Florida prisons each year will eventually be reincarcerated.



According to data from the Florida Department of Corrections, over 60% of people released from Florida prisons will be rearrested within three years, and about one in four will be reincarcerated in a Florida prison during that same 36-month period. By year five, nearly one in three will be reincarcerated in Florida. (3) In other words, one of the biggest drivers of incarceration and the cost of corrections for Florida is the number of people who leave prison only to return shortly thereafter.

(1) U.S. Department of Justice. Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2019. Uniform Crime Report.
(2) As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, data from the years of 2020-2022 are unlikely to be representative of sustained changes in crime and incarceration and so are not presented.
(3). Florida Department of Corrections. 2022. “Florida Recidivism Report: Releases from 2008 to 2020.”

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Numerous factors impact whether a person released from prison will recidivate and be reincarcerated. While reducing crime might be the most obvious goal of corrections, it should not be the only goal. Releasing people who are prepared to be contributing members of their communities is also important. Correctional institutions have the opportunity to address the criminogenic deficiencies of the people they supervise—especially considering that nearly 90% of the over 80,000 people incarcerated in Florida prisons will reenter society. Releasing people who are prepared to reintegrate back into the community will lead to safer neighborhoods, reduce homelessness, reduce unemployment, and will ultimately reduce correctional costs by having fewer people return to prison. To be clear, on average, it costs \$77 per day or \$28,000 per year to incarcerate someone in a Florida prison. (4) Fewer people returning to prison each year means money saved for taxpayers and helps ease the demands of short staffing that currently impact corrections.

Cost-saving efforts, understaffing, and limited program availability have led to releasing people from Florida prisons who are less likely to reenter society successfully. For example, only 17% of the people incarcerated in Florida who need substance use disorder treatment have access to programming. Additionally, 64% of people in Florida facilities need general education, but just 4% are enrolled. (5) Individuals who pose the highest risk for recidivism are often the least likely to receive programming. Clearly, there are areas of improvement for Florida’s reentry practices. While Florida engages in some initiatives that align with best practices, they are limited in their scope and availability, and available programs lack evidence to justify their use.

Best practices for reentry demonstrate six primary areas that should be addressed to improve outcomes: employment, education, substance abuse treatment, mental health, connection, and transitional services. Each domain is detailed below along with available specific programs that have been scientifically evaluated and rated at least “Promising” by the U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs (OJP). The Crime Solutions clearinghouse managed by OJP contains detailed information about programs and practices and employs the highest scientific standards to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, rating them as ineffective, promising, or effective based on the quality of evaluation and the impacts of the program. (6)

(4) Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability. 2022.
<https://oppaga.fl.gov/ProgramSummary/ProgramDetail?programNumber=1074>

(5) Florida Department of Corrections. 2022. “Long Range Program Plan: Fiscal Years 2023-24 through 2027-28.” (here forward: FDC. 2022. LRPP.)

(6) Additional information can be found at <https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/>.

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When instituting correctional programs, it is important to target people who pose the greatest risk of recidivating and to align programs with people's specific criminogenic deficiencies. For example, administering system-wide general education would prove ineffective and wasted on people who have already earned their high school diploma or GED. Similarly, requiring substance abuse treatment of every person in prison regardless of their history of substance use would waste resources and time that could be spent addressing other areas of concern. In sum, programs targeted to specific individual criminogenic deficiencies and toward people at higher risk of reoffending are the most likely to reduce costs, reduce recidivism, and transform people's lives.

Best Practice: Employment

Work training, work-release, and post-release employment are programs that are frequently touted as "common sense" approaches to reentry. Evaluations of employment-related programs such as work release have been conducted in Florida, Minnesota, and Kansas, finding reduced recidivism compared to non-program participants:

Work Release (Florida)

Those in Florida prisons are evaluated for work release readiness programs with approximately 14 months remaining on their incarceration. Eligible participants select work release centers they would like to be transferred to and, once a bed opens, they are moved to that facility. The participant then finds a job in the Florida Work Release system. They work in a job in the community and return to the work release center each day. Participants are visited at work for check-ups and their wages are garnished for room and board fees, any outstanding court costs, and any family costs such as child support. Participation in the program is associated with a 13% reduction in recidivism compared to a matched group of non-participants. (7) Higher-risk individuals are not eligible for the program limiting our current knowledge base on the impacts of work release on the people most likely to recidivate upon release.

(7) Berk, J. 2008. Does Work Release Work? Providence, R.I.: Brown University.

EMPLOY (Minnesota)

EMPLOY is a voluntary program that employs people in prison with Minnesota Correctional Industries, the state's prison industry program, to gain work experience and job skills. Two to three months prior to release, participants attend job sessions that focus on skill assessment, resume writing, interviewing, and applying for jobs. One week prior to release, a job development specialist helps the participant find suitable positions to apply for. After release, a retention specialist meets with the participant at one month, three months, six months, and 12 months post-release to assist with employment. Participants in the program were 32% less likely to be reconvicted, 35% less likely to be rearrested, 55% less likely to be reincarcerated, and 72% more likely to be employed 12 months post-release (8). Cost-benefit analysis conducted in Washington State found that every \$1 spent on this type of program would result in a benefit of \$16.95 for taxpayers and the community (9).

Best Practice: Education

A comprehensive meta-analysis found that participating in general education programs reduced recidivism by 13%, and educational programming increased the odds of employment post-release by 13%. (10) FDC Office of Programs and Reentry estimates that every \$1 spent on Career and Technical Education results in \$11.95 in returns, and every \$1 spent on general education results in \$5 recovered in avoiding reincarceration costs. (11) People in prison have also become eligible for Pell Grants, once again making higher education affordable. One program in New Mexico has evaluated the impact of higher education on reentry:

(8) Duwe, G. (2015). The benefits of keeping idle hands busy: An outcome evaluation of a prisoner reentry employment program. *Crime & Delinquency*, 61(4), 559-586

(9) Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP). 2016. <https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/557>

(10) Davis, L., Steele, J., Bozick, R., Williams, M., Turner, S., Miles, J., Saunders, J., & Steinberg, P. 2014. "How Effective is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go From Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation." Rand Corporation.

(11) Office of Programs and Re-Entry. 2022. "Evidence-Based, Results Driven and Innovative Practices in Workforce Development at The Florida Department of Corrections."

Postsecondary Correctional Education (New Mexico)

The program provides people in prison who have a GED or high school diploma with college-level or vocational courses through one-way online courses or onsite in-person programs. Participants in the programs were significantly less likely to be arrested in their first year after release compared to a matched comparison group of similar people who did not participate (39% of participants were rearrested compared to 45% of non-participants). (12) Certain people, such as those incarcerated for murder or a sex offense, were not eligible for the program so it is not clear what impact a similar program might have on the highest risk groups.

Best Practice: Substance Abuse Treatment

As noted in the program plan for FDC, (13) fewer than 20% of people in Florida’s correctional facilities who require substance abuse treatment have access to programming. Moreover, men who are released from Florida prisons who have ever tested positive on a drug test are 20% more likely to recidivate than those who have never had a positive result. Unfortunately, few evidence-based evaluations have been conducted on in-prison substance abuse programs that demonstrate meaningful outcomes after release. Of the programs that have been evaluated, therapeutic communities for substance abuse have shown the most promise. Therapeutic communities are structured as separate housing units made up of people who require a shared treatment. In substance abuse therapeutic communities, everyone in the housing unit works together to address their substance use disorder issues. Evaluations of these programs in California find significantly lower reincarceration for program participants. For example, a smaller percentage of participants (75.7%) had been reincarcerated after five years compared with non-participants (83.4%). (14) Cost-benefit analysis of therapeutic communities finds that every \$1 spent on the program results in \$5.08 saved. (15)

(12) Winterfield, L., Coggeshall, M. Burke-Stover, M., Correa, V., & Todd, T. 2009. “The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report.” Washington: D.C.: Urban Institute.

(13) FDC. 2022. LRPP.

(14) Prendergast, M.L., Hall, E. & Wexler, H.K. 2003. “Multiple Measures of Outcome in Assessing a Prison-Based Drug Treatment Program.” In Nathaniel J. Pallone (ed.). *Treating Substance Abusers in Correctional Contexts: New Understandings, New Modalities*. Philadelphia, Pa.: The Haworth Press, Inc., 65–94

(15) WSIPP. 2016. <https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/187>

Best Practice: Mental Health Support

The focus of mental health programming in prison is two-fold. The first is the requirement to provide care for people with severe mental illness that directly impacts their criminal activity. The most promising programs that address this challenge provide care for people while they are incarcerated and continue to provide follow-up care post-release while connecting people with the services necessary to continue care long-term. Programs that maintain a continuity of care from incarceration through release and help to secure care within the community are critical for long-term reentry success. If care is provided during incarceration and immediately terminated upon release, people leaving prison are less likely to receive the treatment they need. This increases their chances of returning to prison in the future. Spending the resources up front to maintain care is more cost-effective than reincarcerating people who recidivate because they stopped receiving mental health care once they were released into the community.

Washington State has instituted a program known as the Offender Reentry Community Safety Program that provides up to five years of services post-release to help reduce the likelihood that people with severe mental illness will recidivate. Evaluations of the program find that participants are 42% less likely to commit a new felony four years after release compared to those who did not participate in the program. (16) Cost-benefit analysis finds the program costs just over \$8,000 per participant per year, but that for every \$1 spent on the program taxpayers are saved \$1.90 in crime and criminal justice costs. (17)

(16) Mayfield, J. 2009. *The Dangerous Mentally Ill Offender Program: Four-Year Felony Recidivism and Cost Effectiveness*. Olympia, Wash.: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

(17) WSIPP. 2012. <https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/8>

Mentally Ill Offender Community Transition Program (MIOCTP, Washington)

The MIOCTP is a program for people leaving prison with a major mental illness that influenced their previous criminal activity, have been identified as someone less likely to offend if they receive ongoing treatment, are likely to have trouble finding housing and/or treatment, have at least 90 days remaining on their sentence, and are not classified as a high-risk sex offender. The program involves an assessment, treatment planning, and entitlement application prior to release. Upon release participants engage in intensive case-management coordinate treatments services including structured programming, daily contact, home visits, and structured goals to avoid recidivism. (18)

The second aspect of mental health care in prison addresses the cognitive behavioral problems of people who engage in crime. Some people in prison have perceptions about crime and deviant behavior that impedes their ability to live a crime-free life, or they have difficulty managing their anger or controlling their impulses when faced with adversity. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a means of addressing the cognitive behavioral deficiencies of people in prison helping them to make better decisions and improve their thinking patterns, problem solving, and interpersonal communication. Cost-benefit analysis finds a return of \$6.31 for every \$1 spent on CBT programming for moderate- and high-risk individuals. (19)

Enhanced Thinking Skills (England, UK)

The program consists of 20 interactive sessions lasting two hours each between professionals and program participants over a four-to-six-week period. During the sessions, participants engage in activities and role play exercises to develop cognitive skills. Participants in the program were 52% less likely to be reconvicted two years post-release. (20)

(18) Theurer, G. & Lovell, D. 2008. "Recidivism of Offenders with Mental Illness Released from Prison to an Intensive Community Treatment Program." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 47(4):385–406.

(19) WISPP. 2016. <https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/10>

(20) Friendship, C., Blud, L., Erikson, M., Travers, R., & Thornton, D. 2003. "Cognitive-Behavioural Treatment for Imprisoned Offenders: An Evaluation of HM Prison Service's Cognitive Skills Programmes." *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 8:103–14

Best Practice: Connection

Several states, including Florida, have evaluated the importance of visitation for improving life outcomes and reducing reincarceration. Analysis of Florida’s visitation found that people who were visited during their incarceration were significantly less likely to recidivate compared to people who did not receive visits (40.4% who received visits recidivated at the three-year follow-up compared to 45.1% who did not receive visits). (21) In a similar evaluation in Minnesota, data showed that a person who received any visit while in prison was 13% less likely to be reconvicted for a felony and 25% less likely to be rearrested compared to people who never received a visit. (22) It is important to note, though, that alternatives to in-person visitation have also been evaluated and found to be less effective. For example, an evaluation also conducted in Minnesota of video visitation found that it only affected some types of recidivism, providing reduced impact compared to in-person visitation. (23) An example of a promising program enacted in Maryland goes beyond the traditional practice of visitation for maintaining connectivity between people in prison and the community:

Community Mediation Maryland: Reentry Mediation Program (CMM)

CMM’s Reentry Mediation Program provides mediated visitation for people in their final six to twelve months of incarceration. Eligible participants can choose to request a mediated meeting with anyone on the outside they believe will be important during their reentry. People often meet with family members and a mediator to help facilitate dialogue and suggest creative solutions for some of the challenges that people face when reintegrating with family and in their communities such as securing employment, housing, and post-incarceration relocation. Meeting with a mediator can also help settle disputes that may have occurred between people in prison and their loved ones, making the transition and reintegration into families and homes easier. People who participated in the program were 13% less likely to be rearrested, 15% less likely to be reconvicted for a new offense, and 12% less likely to return to prison. (24)

(21) Mears, D., Cochran, J., Siennick, S., & Bales, W. 2012. “Prison visitation and recidivism.” *Justice Quarterly* 26(6): 889-918.

(22) Duwe, G. & Clark, V. 2011. “Blessed Be the Social Tie That Binds: The Effect of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism.” *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 24(3):271–96.

(23) Duwe, G. & McNeeley, S. 2021. “Just as Good as the Real Thing? The Effects of Prison Video Visitation on Recidivism.” *Crime & Delinquency* 67(4):475–97.

(24) Flower, S.M. 2014. *Community Mediation Maryland: Reentry Mediation In-Depth Recidivism Analysis*. Greenbelt, Md.: Choice Research Associates.

Best Practice: Transitional Services

Transitional service programs involve the delivery of programming not only during incarceration but also during reentry and post-release. Several states have engaged in transitional programs including Wisconsin, California, Ohio, and North Dakota. All of these programs provide various services dealing with the challenges of reentry including employment assistance, housing assistance, and substance abuse treatment during the transition from prison back into the community. All the programs are rated “promising” and deliver meaningful outcomes for program participants. North Dakota’s SVORI program demonstrated reductions in the likelihood of rearrest for participants. (25) Ohio’s Community-based Residential Program resulted in significantly reduced likelihoods of arrest, technical violations for parolees, or reincarceration. (26) California’s Preventing Parolee Crime Program resulted in recidivism of 45% for enrollees compared to 53% for people on parole who were not enrolled in the program. (27)

Safe Streets Prisoner Release Initiative (Wisconsin)

The program provides wraparound services for people 35 and younger leaving prisons in Wisconsin. The goal is to reduce recidivism by aiding with employment, drug treatment, family problems, debt, gang involvement, and interpersonal skills. The program provides six months of services prior to release and monthly visits post-release. Evaluations of the program find it reduced recidivism among participants with 63% recidivating compared to 72% of non-participants. (28)

(25) Bouffard, J. & Bergeron, L. 2006. “Reentry Works: The Implementation and Effectiveness of a Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 44(2/3): 1–29.

(26) Lowenkamp, C.T. & Latessa, E.J. 2005. “Increasing the Effectiveness of Correctional Programming through the Risk Principle: Identifying Offenders for Residential Placement.” *Criminology & Public Policy* 4(2):263–90.

(27) Zhang, S., Roberts, R., & Callanan, V. 2006. “Preventing Parolees From Returning to Prison Through Community-Based Reintegration.” *Crime & Delinquency* 52(4):551–71

(28) Cook, P.J., Kang, S., Braga, A.A., Ludwig, J., & O’Brien, M.E. 2014. “An Experimental Evaluation of a Comprehensive Employment-Oriented Prisoner Re-entry Program.” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 31(3):355–82.

Operation New Hope (Florida)

Operation New Hope is an organization in Florida that delivers programming to people exiting prison and formerly incarcerated people in the community. The in-prison program they offer, Ready4Release, provides transitional services for people exiting prison as they prepare for their reintegration with the community. The organization also offers a work-development program, known as Ready4Work, that offers employment skills training for people with prior criminal justice involvement. The program recently received over \$8 million in state funding for expansion. However, the program has yet to be evaluated for its effectiveness, and its scope is limited to certain service areas and tends to focus on low- to moderate-risk participants (though participant eligibility is made on case-by-case basis for higher risk participants). Expansion of this program may prove promising, but first a detailed, evidence-based evaluation needs to be completed.

Recommendations:

1. Fund evidence-based programs that promote positive relationships between people in prison and their loved ones through in person visitation. Initiatives that encourage meaningful interactions between people in prison and the community ease the transition back into society by increasing the likelihood of employment and decreasing homelessness and recidivism. Alternative means of communication such as video visitation are a supplement for maintaining connections, not a replacement.
2. Provide workforce training and opportunities for job skill development during incarceration. A lack of gainful employment acts as a barrier for successful reentry. Policymakers should fund scientific evaluations of work release programs for higher risk people and fund evaluations of community-based and transitional employment programs like Ready4Work. Should these evaluations demonstrate promise, the programs should be expanded throughout the state.

3. Adequately fund general education and higher education services. Education acts as a pathway to employment, better critical thinking skills, and improved judgment. The expansion of the Federal Pell Grant program opens a funding stream for higher education partnerships between the FDC and the state college and university system.
4. Supplement current funding to expand substance abuse and mental health treatment programs, including programs aimed at cognitive behavioral therapy.
5. Provide transitional services. Criminogenic deficiencies do not end when prison sentences end. Programs aimed at transforming lives cannot be expected to take place in prison alone. Transitional services that continue to address needs from prison into the community will prove the most effective.
6. Fund scientific, evidence-based evaluation of any program that receives funding from the state. Funds should be duly allocated for the evaluation and any continued or subsequent funding should be tied to the results of the program evaluation.

Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of people in Florida's prisons will eventually return to Florida communities. Preparing them for successful reintegration is critical for ensuring the communities they return to are safe. The programs that people in Florida prisons currently have access to are limited in scope and efficacy. Improving these programs and implementing additional evidence-based initiatives will help reduce crime, ultimately reduce costs for taxpayers, and improve the lives of people leaving prison and the people living in the communities to which they return.



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