

USING TIME TO REDUCE CRIME:

Federal Prisoner Survey Results Show Ways to Reduce Recidivism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virtually all federal prisoners will leave prison and rejoin society someday. According to a recent study, nearly one-half (49.3%) of federal prisoners were rearrested for a new crime or rearrested for a violation of supervision conditions within eight years of their release. Everyone is safer when prison policies and programs reduce the likelihood that returning citizens will reoffend.

In August 2016, FAMM conducted our first-ever survey of federal prisoners to learn as much as we could about the frequency, type, and quality of programs and education they are currently offered. More than 2,000 individuals responded, offering extensive details about the programs, jobs, and educational opportunities available to them in prison. The survey results will give policymakers a better understanding of what federal prisons currently provide and what reforms are needed to advance the goal of reducing recidivism.

Here's what we found and recommend:

✓ Create More Meaningful Work Opportunities

Finding: Nearly every prisoner has a job, but many jobs are part-time or “make work” jobs whose impact on a person’s risk of recidivism has not been studied or measured.

Recommendation: Congress and the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) should invest resources to provide meaningful jobs similar to those that a person may be able to attain outside of prison.

✓ Increase Access to Computers

Finding: Just 2 percent of survey respondents had access to computers to complete educational coursework or learn up-to-date computer technology.

Recommendation: BOP should allow prisoners greater access to computers and the internet and consider allowing prisoners to purchase tablet computers.

✓ Expand and Improve Educational Programming

Finding: The quality and availability of educational programs vary greatly. The most widely attended classes, which are usually taught by other prisoners, lack rigor and substance. Attaining a college degree in federal prison is difficult, if not impossible, for most prisoners.

Recommendation: Policymakers should ensure that quality educational programming is consistent across federal institutions, provided by educational professionals, and offered to all prisoners regardless of their offense or release date. Congress should also eliminate the ban on federal prisoners receiving Pell Grants.

✓ Expand and Keep Current Vocational Training

Finding: A government-funded study found that vocational training makes prisoners 28 percent more likely to obtain post-release employment than prisoners who simply take academic programs. Survey respondents told us that vocational training is popular and coveted, but is limited and offered only to prisoners who are close to their release dates.

Recommendation: Vocational training should be expanded, provided by certified professionals, and offered to all prisoners, regardless of their offense or release date. BOP should partner with public and private employers to ensure that training is current for today’s job market.

✓ **Treat All Prisoners With Drug Abuse Disorders**

Finding: The Bureau of Prisons' Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP), which is offered to a limited number of prisoners, has been found to lessen the likelihood of recidivism, relapse, and even prison misconduct. The overwhelming majority of respondents who participated in RDAP found the program beneficial.

Recommendation: BOP should ease the program's current restrictions on eligibility so that all prisoners who have a diagnosed substance abuse problem are incentivized to participate. Other non-residential drug treatment programs should also be incentivized as the RDAP is, by allowing prisoners to earn sentence reductions for program completion.

✓ **Provide Mental Health and Behavioral Counseling**

Finding: Many federal prisoners have histories of mental illness, trauma, poor decision-making and impulse control, or inability to manage anger and other emotions. Studies show that cognitive behavioral therapy can reduce recidivism, but more than two-thirds of prisoners who responded to our survey said they had not received mental or behavioral health treatment.

Recommendation: Mental health treatment and behavioral counseling, including faith-based programs, should be expanded until they are available to all prisoners who wish to participate. In addition, the BOP should hire more trained and licensed mental health professionals.

✓ **Use Incentives to Increase Participation in Recidivism-Reducing Programming**

Finding: The vast majority of prisoners would respond to incentives to participate in recidivism-reducing programs, especially if they could earn sentence reductions. Other incentives, such as additional halfway house and home confinement time and extra visiting and phone privileges, would increase participation as well.

Recommendation: Policymakers should utilize all of these incentives, including sentence reductions, based on their value to each prisoner.

✓ **Keep Prisoners Closer to Their Families**

Finding: Half of respondents told us they were incarcerated more than 500 air miles from home, despite a BOP policy that seeks to keep prisoners within that distance.

Recommendation: BOP should place prisoners within 500 driving—not air—miles of their families and relocate prisoners closer to home whenever possible, except in limited cases.

✓ **Expand, Improve, and Evaluate Halfway Houses**

Finding: Most prisoners are aware that under the Second Chance Act they could receive up to 12 months of halfway house time, but expect to get only three to six months. Many prisoners have concerns about staying at halfway houses.

Recommendation: The Justice Department, with funding from Congress, should increase halfway house capacity so that all prisoners who need a full year can live a full year in a halfway house, and study the efficacy of halfway houses. Finally, Congress should expand use of home confinement by removing its current limitation to six months/10 percent of the sentence.