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Oregonians Nearly Unanimous in Support of Reentry Services for Former Prisoners

Research in Brief

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI)

Jody Sundt, Renee Vanderhoff, Laura Shaver, & Sarah Lazzeroni



Key Findings

- The majority of Oregonians endorse rehabilitation as the main emphasis of prison.
- Nine out of ten favor providing inmates with services to prepare them for their release.
- More than 80% of Oregonians support providing former prisoners with reentry services including: mental healthcare, housing support, education, job training, and drug treatment.
- Ninety-three percent of the public favor closely supervising released prisoners.
- Oregonians hold pragmatic views about how to best reintegrate former prisoners into the community, favoring a combination of treatment and control.



Growing population of former prisoners pose challenges

Between 1991 and 2011, Oregon's prison population more than doubled, increasing from 6,596 to 14,061. Coupled with this trend, the number of individuals released from prison has ballooned. In 1991, there were 6,663 former prisoners under parole or post-prison supervision. By 2011, the number of former prisoners supervised in the community grew to 13,520. On average, 383 inmates are released from Oregon prisons every month. These numbers illustrate the "iron law of imprisonment," a phrase termed by criminologist Jeremy Travis, to remind us of the fact that, except for those who die in prison, every person we incarcerate eventually returns to our communities.

The vast majority of Oregon prisoners—94% or more—are released to the community after serving a median sentence of five and a half years. Most former prisoners struggle to resume their family relationships, find employment, secure housing, and access healthcare. The Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) estimates that close to 60% of inmates are addicted or drug dependent, two-thirds have an education need such as adult basic education or a GED, and half of inmates have a mental health need. Finally, close to 30% of those released will be convicted of a new felony within three years. Preparing former prisoners to assume productive and law-abiding lifestyles is now one of the greatest challenges facing the criminal justice system.

Although the need is clear, in the context of two decades of "get-tough" legislation and ballot measures, questions remain about whether the public supports treatment for prisoners. Moreover, little is known about Oregonians' views regarding how best to respond to the growing population of former inmates.

Support for prisoner rehabilitation

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Results for this report are based on telephone interviews conducted June 15-July 27, 2010 among a random sample of 1569 adults 18 years of age or older living in the state of Oregon. The Portland State University Survey Research Laboratory conducted the interviewing in English and Spanish.

Racial and ethnic minorities were oversampled to obtain more reliable results from members of these sub-groups. Women were overrepresented due to their higher participation rates. The subsamples are weighted so that the results accurately reflect the proportion of women in the population of Oregon.

The error attributed to the sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for the sample as a whole is plus or minus 2.47 percentage points.

For more information about the research methodology contact: Dr. Jody Sundt, sundt@pdx.edu

In a statewide survey conducted in the summer of 2010, Oregonians expressed solid support for rehabilitating prisoners. When asked what the main emphasis of prison should be, 53% said that prisons should emphasize offender rehabilitation. Close to two out of five citizens felt that the main purpose of prisons should be to protect society, and 9% favored punishment as the main emphasis of incarceration.

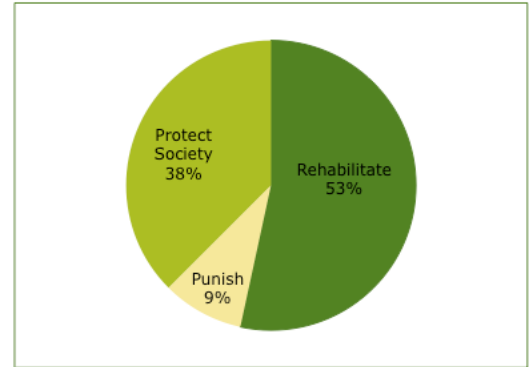


FIGURE 1. "WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE THE MAIN EMPHASIS IN MOST PRISONS?"

Regardless of their beliefs about the *main* purpose of prisons, the public voiced nearly unanimous support for providing inmates with services to help prepare them for their release. More than 9 out of 10 Oregonians favored providing inmates with job training, mental health treatment, educational services, and drug treatment.

Support for Reentry Services

Public support for rehabilitation services extends to those already released from prison. Eighty percent or more of those polled favored providing housing assistance, mental health services, drug treatment, education, and job training to help prevent reoffending. In brief, there is a clear consensus among Oregonians about the need to support former prisoners' reentry to society.

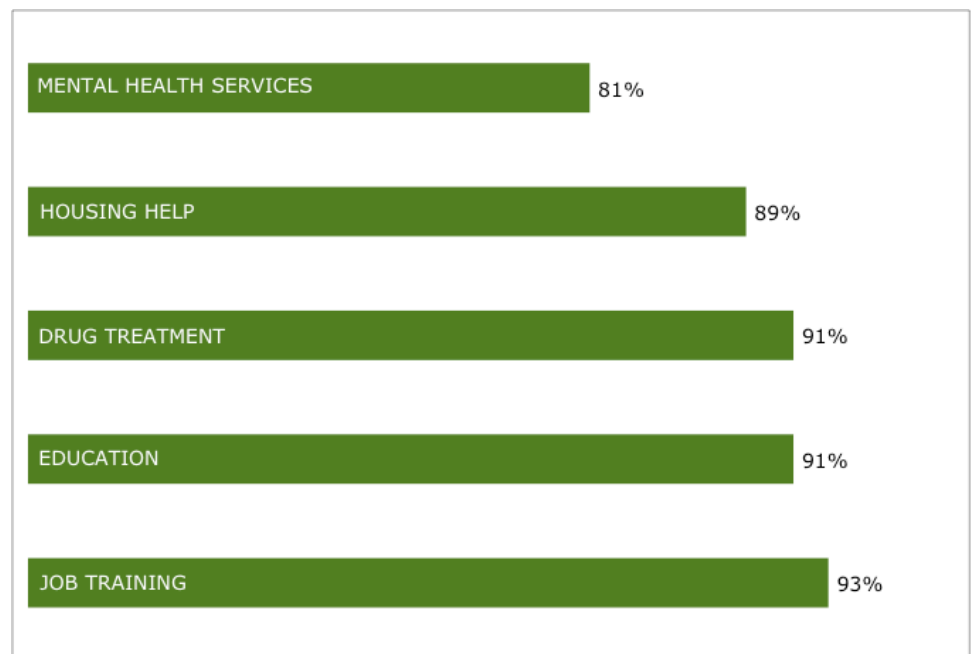


FIGURE 2. TOTAL PERCENTAGE SUPPORT FOR REENTRY SERVICES

Protecting the public

Although the public strongly endorses services to support offender reentry, they also favor closely supervising former prisoners. Ninety-three percent of Oregonians favor providing “close supervision” of those released from prison, with 38% strongly favoring this option.

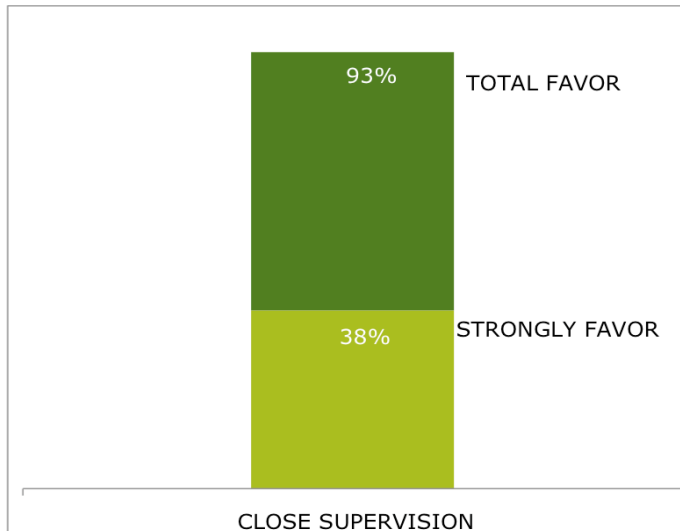


FIGURE 3. TOTAL PERCENTAGE SUPPORT FOR CLOSE SUPERVISION

The dual importance placed on supporting and controlling former prisoners suggests that the public is pragmatic rather than ideological when it comes to thinking about how to best reintegrate former prisoners back into society. Support for both treatment and control reflects Oregonians’ desire to promote public safety.

Ripe for Reform

Authors’ Commentary

Oregon is making strides to address the challenges associated with returning large numbers of former prisoners to our communities. A Reentry Council was established in 2007 to facilitate sound policy and remove obstacles to successful reintegration. The DOC also established an ambitious Accountability Model that embraces a central role for evidence-based practices in improving public safety. Nevertheless, just 2.5% of the total DOC budget is allocated toward inmate treatment and education.

Evidence is clear that inmates who receive appropriate treatment services are less likely to reoffend when they are released. According to research conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, effective prison and community-based programs can realize significant public safety improvements and cost-savings. For example, vocational education programs reduce reoffending an average of 9%, saving \$13,738 per inmate participant. Similarly, community-

“The opposite of punishment is reward; the opposite of treatment is neglect.”

– Todd Clear

IMPRISONING
COMMUNITIES: HOW
MASS INCARCERATION
MAKES DISADVANTAGED
NEIGHBORHOODS
WORSE

“Laws for the punishment of crime shall be founded on these principles: protection of society, personal responsibility, accountability for one’s actions and reformation.”

– Constitution of Oregon

ARTICLE 1, SEC. 15

based drug treatment reduces the commission of new crimes by 9.3%, saving \$10,054 per participant.

The survey results reported here provide further support for pursuing policies to reform offenders and develop reentry services. Oregonians embrace offender rehabilitation as a correctional goal. In addition, they report unequivocal support for the need to prepare inmates for their eventual release as a matter of public safety. Once released, the public favors policies that simultaneously hold former prisoners accountable and aid their ability to assume responsible lifestyles.

In executive order 12-08, Governor Kitzhaber reestablished the Commission on Public Safety citing the need to place Oregon's correctional policy on a more sustainable path. The Commission is charged with identifying "fiscally responsible and sustainable evidence-based policies and practices that will control correctional growth, hold offenders accountable, and protect public safety." Reinvesting in offender rehabilitation and reentry services are pragmatic reforms that Oregonians are very likely to support.

For more information about CJPRI visit
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Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute

The Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Division of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University. CJPRI conducts research for criminal justice and community organizations, improves knowledge through independent research projects, and provides Oregon policymakers with a forum to explore criminal justice policy and practice using objective, performance-based criteria.

"As we have embarked upon one of the greatest social experiments of our time—the expansive use of prisons as our response to crime—we have forgotten the iron law of imprisonment: they all come back. Except for those few individuals who die in custody, every person we send to prison returns to live with us."

– Jeremy Travis

BUT THEY ALL COME
BACK: FACING THE
CHALLENGES OF
PRISONER REENTRY

