



# Policy Memorandum

ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE • OCTOBER 24, 2008 • POLICY MEMORANDUM #131

## Why crime prevention is better than incarceration

BY ALGERNON AUSTIN

Incarceration is a necessary part of criminal justice, but the most effective criminal justice policies are those that prevent individuals from ever engaging in criminal activity. Below are six reasons why actively preventing crime is better than reactively responding to crime with incarceration.

### ***1. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.***

The old adage about disease prevention being better than treatment applies equally well to the issue of crime. It is better to prevent a criminal career from ever beginning than to try to stop it with incarceration.

Incarceration requires a crime to occur. The average criminal commits several crimes before being arrested. There would be much less crime if we prevent individuals from becoming criminals in the first place.

There is also a high recidivism rate for the formerly incarcerated. Incarceration prevents individuals from committing crime while they are in prison, but it does not prevent them from resuming criminal careers after release. Again, any policy that prevents people from starting criminal careers results in much more crime prevention than incarceration.

### ***2. Incarceration does little to prevent crime.***

Even if we ignore the crime that incarceration does not prevent before a person is incarcerated and after a person is released, it is still a highly ineffective method of crime prevention. Since 1993, the United States has experienced a tremendous drop in crime. Violent crime and property crime rates have declined by more than 50%.

How much of the crime drop was due to incarceration? Estimates range from 10% to 40%, but the evidence for a weaker effect—around 10%—appears to be stronger.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the consensus is that most of the crime drop since 1993 was not due to incarceration. We can invest in policies that yield large reductions in crime without the collateral damage of incarceration.

---

### **3. Evidence suggests that some policies actually foster higher crime rates.**

There is evidence to suggest that tough-on-crime policies may actually increase crime in the long-term. Researchers have found that treating juveniles as adults in the criminal justice system increases their likelihood of recidivism. There is evidence suggesting that the harsher punishment of adults in prison also increases their likelihood of recidivism.<sup>2</sup> In a more general sense, the limited opportunities for legal employment among ex-offenders may be an additional factor in their high recidivism rate.

### **4. Incarceration is very expensive.**

In 1970, the United States had a relatively average incarceration rate among its peers in Western industrialized countries. Since America began its tough-on-crime and war-on-drugs approach, the incarceration rate has climbed to about seven times the Western industrialized average—and it is still climbing.

Putting so many people in jail and prison is incredibly expensive. We currently spend over \$200 billion a year on policing, the judiciary, and corrections to process and hold all of these people. And the financial cost is still rising.

### **5. Ex-offenders are not very economically productive citizens.**

When released from prison, an individual's ability to participate in the economy tends to be below his or her potential. It is often difficult for ex-offenders to find work. Felons are legally restricted from certain occupations. One survey of four urban areas found that only 13% of employers said that they definitely would consider hiring an ex-offender.<sup>3</sup> Audit studies have found that, in the low-wage labor market, male ex-offenders are much less likely to be offered a job than males without a criminal record. Black male ex-offenders, especially, had very low rates of job interviews and offers.

The economic losses of ex-offenders are not distributed evenly by race and class; they are heavily concentrated in poor black communities. The communities that have the least dollars to spare are the ones that lose the most from mass incarceration.

### **6. High incarceration rates for blacks come with collateral damage.**

In addition to the economic losses of poor black communities, the mass incarceration of blacks yields other forms of collateral damage. Black political power is reduced by felon disenfranchisement laws. Also, the population eligible in calculations of political representation is diminished by those removed due to incarceration. Incarcerated populations are often added to white communities where prisons are located, thus increasing their political power.

Incarceration reduces the likelihood of marriage among blacks.<sup>4</sup> It also leads to an imbalance in the sex-ratio in poor black communities due to the high incarceration rate of poor black males. This imbalance may distort male-female romantic relations by giving males additional power in relationships that they may abuse. Research is necessary to see if this is, in fact, the case.<sup>5</sup>

A high incarceration rate has the potential to weaken incarceration as a deterrent. If a high proportion of the population has been incarcerated, then there is likely to be less social stigma attached to being incarcerated. Negative cultural values from prison life may be transmitted into communities with high proportions of ex-offenders. There needs to be more work done in examining the cultural consequences of mass incarceration.

Overall, incarceration is an ineffective, expensive, and socially harmful way of fighting crime. A smart-on-crime strategy would invest more in socially constructive crime-prevention policies (see **Table 1**) to minimize the need for the destructive crime prevention of incarceration.

**TABLE 1**

**High-quality pre-kindergarten vs. incarceration**

*On all measures, high-quality pre-kindergarten is a better crime prevention policy than incarceration.*

<b>Does the policy . . .</b>	<b>Policy options</b>		<b>Which is the best policy on this issue?</b>
	<b>High-quality pre-k</b>	<b>Incarceration</b>	
<i>Prevent individuals from becoming criminals?</i>	Yes	No	High-quality pre-k
<i>Prevent crime in the short term?</i>	Yes	Only after one or more crimes have been committed—usually more than one	High-quality pre-k
<i>Cause crime in the long term?</i>	No	Yes, under some circumstances	High-quality pre-k
<i>Decrease individuals' job prospects and earnings?</i>	No, increases job prospects and earnings	Yes	High-quality pre-k
<i>Weaken black communities economically, politically, and socially?</i>	No, strengthens black communities	Yes	High-quality pre-k
<i>Cost per student/inmate per year</i>	\$10,000	\$25,000	High-quality pre-k

**Endnotes**

1. Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 168-188; Michael Jacobson, *Downsizing Prisons: How to Reduce Crime and End Mass Incarceration* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 106-130.
2. Angela McGowan, Robert Hahn, Akiva Liberman et al., "Effects on Violence of Laws and Policies Facilitating the Transfer of Juveniles from Juvenile Justice System to Adult Justice System: A Systematic Review," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 32(4S), April 2007, pp. S7-S28, <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/violence/mcgowanarticle4.pdf>; and M. Keith Chen and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Does Prison Harden Inmates? A Discontinuity-Based Approach," Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics, Yale University, January 2004, <http://cowles.econ.yale.edu/P/cd/d14b/d1450.pdf>.
3. Harry J. Holzer, Steven Raphael and Michael A. Stoll, "Will Employers Hire Former Offenders? Employer Preferences, Background Checks, and Their Determinants," in *Imprisoning America: The Social Effects of Mass Incarceration*, eds. Mary Pattillo, David Weiman, and Bruce Western (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 209-210.
4. Western, *Punishment and Inequality*, 130-167.
5. This dynamic has been suggested by Sandra D. Lane et al. in "Structural Violence and Racial Disparity in HIV Transmission," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 15 (2004): 328-329.

*This document is reprinted from Black Directions 2(5). Copyright Thora Institute LLC 2007.*