

# PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY RESPONSIBLY: KEY TAKEAWAYS

## COMMITMENT TO SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY

When it comes to safety, elected officials, law enforcement officers, victims and survivors of crime, and community members all want the same outcome: **less harm to their communities**. Strategies for improving public safety have varied across the country, prompting researchers to study this topic closely and determine which approaches are most effective in preventing public safety threats.

Their findings overwhelmingly conclude that removing perpetrators from communities is merely a short-term response and not a reliable crime prevention and accountability strategy. Effectively improving public safety instead requires comprehensive responses that target the root of criminal behavior to prevent future occurrences – *and future victims*.

## APPROACH: INCARCERATION

### Do long prison sentences improve public safety?

- **Research shows that incarceration is not more effective at reducing recidivism** than alternatives like problem-solving courts or community supervision and treatment interventions.<sup>i</sup>
- Researchers examining the relationship between longer prison stays and crime prevalence determined that **incarceration has a limited impact on crime reduction**.<sup>ii</sup>



### What works to promote safety in the community?

#### ***Incentives & Rewards***

- Incentives are a key piece of “contingency management” in corrections settings, which is based on the psychological principle that **rewarding positive behavior will increase the likelihood of that behavior continuing**.<sup>iii</sup>
- Studies have found **the use of positive reinforcements** such as verbal recognition, financial rewards, and reducing time from a sentence to be effective in promoting behavior change for justice-involved populations. In fact, evidence supports using incentives 4 to 5 times more often than sanctions to encourage compliance.<sup>iv</sup>
- **States that have restricted incentives in prisons have seen increases in misconduct**.<sup>v</sup>

- NC • Prison infractions for men and women increased following the passage of a structured sentencing law in 1993
- AZ • Prison violations increased 50% following the elimination of parole and good time credits in 1993
- FL • Violent, property, and disorderly misconduct infractions increased following the requirement of 85% time served in prison for all felony offenses

### Programming

- Recent meta-analyses and rigorous evaluations of prison-based educational programs are shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and improving post-release employment outcomes.<sup>vi</sup>
- Policies that de-incentivize participation in programming remove the external motivation for behavior change. **Arizona experienced a 20% decrease in education program participation after the state removed parole and earned time credits in 1993.**<sup>vii</sup>

## APPROACH: REENTRY & COMMUNITY SUPPORT



When people are released from prison, which factors are most important to ensuring successful reentry?

- Coined as “protective factors,” **researchers have identified housing, employment, and pro-social relationships** among the key components that can heavily reduce the risk of reoffending.
- Many states that have addressed protective factors as part of reentry saw decreased recidivism.<sup>viii</sup>

- MI • The recidivism rate among graduates of Michigan's "vocational village" prison workforce development program has steadily declined since 2016
- OH • A study of a public-private permanent housing program with supportive services in Ohio found that participants were significantly less likely to return to prison than counterparts released without housing
- NH • Recognizing the well-established link between socialization and successful reentry, the New Hampshire Department of Corrections Family Connections Center facilitates contact and continued relationships between incarcerated people and loved ones, particularly children

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vii Macdonald, D. (2024). Truth in Sentencing, Incentives and Recidivism. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4806765>.

viii Odell, Hope. Michigan prison recidivism declines as vocational skills rise. *Capitol New Service*. March 18, 2022. <https://news.jrn.msu.edu/2022/03/michigan-prison-recidivism-declines-as-vocational-skills-rise/>; Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research web site. Retrieved January 17, 2025.

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/summer16/highlight3.html>; New Hampshire Department of Corrections Web Site, retrieved January 17, 2025.

<https://www.corrections.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt536/files/documents/family-connections-center-final-6.7.24.pdf>.