Effective Reentry Programs

This essay appeared as an Editorial Introduction to an article in <u>Criminology and Public Policy</u> (Vol. 5, No. 2, May 2006) that presented the findings of a rigorous evaluation of an evidence-based reentry program, Project Greenlight in New York State. The article and two reaction essays are available through the publisher, Blackwell Publishing, http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/.

In recent years, policymakers and practitioners have become aware of the importance of research in determining 'what works' in correctional programming. They have begun to use information regarding 'evidence-based' practices to make decisions about the programs that they should implement. Thus, the likelihood that research may actually be the basis for criminal justice practice has never been greater. This attention to developing correctional programs based on sound principles and rigorous evaluation is long overdue. It has been more than 30 years since Martinson's famous article (Martinson, 1974) and 27 years since the National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) Panel on Research on Rehabilitative Techniques called for "research on criminal rehabilitation [with] rigorous [attention to] experimental design, theoretical rationale, and monitoring of integrity and strength of treatment" (Sechrest et al., 1979:10). Over a decade ago, the discussion focused on identifying the principles of effective correctional treatment programs that are critical to successful outcomes (Andrews, 1995; Andrews et al., 1990; see also Petersilia, 2004). More recently, the criminal justice field has been captivated by the call for "evidence-based programs" that federal policy makers are increasingly attentive to (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2006).

Yet, there is no consensus answer to the question "Do prisoner reentry programs work?" Petersilia examined the existing literature, spending months on what she thought would be a short project, and concluded that we know what works in reentry *in theory*, but that research and practice are "moving on independent tracks and the gulfs between them are

still wide" (2004:8). She was especially disappointed at the lack of quality evaluation on correctional programs. Aos and colleagues (2006) recently released a comprehensive meta-analysis of adult correctional programs and found several categories of programs that effectively reduce recidivism. However, others, notably Farabee (2005), but also Farringon and Welsh (2005) and Weisburd and colleagues (2001), are much less sanguine about the recent rehabilitation literature, particularly the findings from the subset of rigorous, well-designed experiments of the type recommended by the National Academy of Sciences' Panel. In the opinion of these scholars, if significant reductions in recidivism are found – and that is a rare result – the effect sizes are very small.

Into this cauldron of dialogue on the effectiveness of correctional treatment comes Wilson and Davis' well-executed, experimental evaluation of a prisoner reentry program, *Project Greenlight* (GL) -- one of only a handful of such studies in a decade. The developers of GL attempted to apply evidence-based principles in designing a new reentry program in New York. Thus, they took an important step forward in correctional program development by looking to research results and effective principles to help guide project design. Wilson and Davis' conclusion from their evaluation -- that GL did not reduce recidivism, and may actually have increased it – will add to the renewed controversy over the effectiveness of correctional treatment programs.

However, in insightful commentaries both Rhine and his colleagues and Marlowe point out that as implemented, GL was not sufficiently different in design from other failed correctional programs nor was the GL treatment delivered appropriately. Marlowe further argues that the evidence of program effectiveness on which GL was based never existed; hence, the developers of GL were "misled." He critiques the studies underlying the

component theories of GL, finding them seriously flawed with weak designs and unproven, unstandardized interventions. Marlowe concludes that the field has yet to develop a realistic picture of what it takes to change offender behavior.

Rhine and his colleagues are more optimistic about the underlying research used by the GL developers and believe that the GL evaluation results were due to poor implementation of the intended treatment, calling the findings "not unusual [for] a large-scale implementation of evidence-based practices in real-world settings." They lay the responsibility for GL's failure at the doorstep of poor program integrity and failed implementation. In essence, Andrew's principles of effective correctional treatment were ignored. Among the critical principles that appear to have been disregarded in the design of GL were failure to match individual needs to service plans and lack of an intensive and mandatory post-release treatment component that would permit continuity of services during the period of highest risk of failure. Rhine and his colleagues call for detailed process evaluations of programs to ensure program and implementation fidelity before launching expensive, time-consuming evaluations.

The story of GL's design, implementation, and evaluation provides many lessons to evaluators, practitioners, and even funders. First, if an intervention is poorly conceived and/or poorly implemented, the program is unlikely to be successful. Fidelity to essential principles of effective correctional treatment (Andrews, 1990) -- articulated at least a decade ago -- is the cornerstone of successful reentry programs for former prisoners. Second, even negative results can inform policy and practice. Wilson and Davis are to be commended for their careful, rigorous approach. Their thorough documentation of the GL evaluation along with the reaction essays by Rhine and his colleagues and Marlowe provide extended critical

analysis of GL and the evaluation results, which is essential to designing a more effective prisoner reentry program. In fact, the field may learn more from this failed project than from a terse evaluation report of a successful reentry program. Third, the results of GL should encourage public and private funders to build on the GL experience and support other reentry programs and their evaluations. The field is starving for more high quality evaluations with experimental or strong quasi-experimental designs and for better guidance, not only as to what has worked in reentry but what can work. Moving the science of effective correctional interventions forward requires a steady diet of quality programs and rigorous evaluations if we are to reduce recidivism among former prisoners (see Committee on Improving Evaluation of Anti-Crime Programs, 2005). Literally hundreds of reentry programs are underway that could be assessed for possible evaluation.

As reentry research in the past few years has clearly shown (e.g., Travis, 2005), there are many "rocks in the path from prison to home", but there are just as many rocks in the design and implementation of reentry interventions, and their elimination would provide a smoother trail for helping men and women exit prison and return home. Given the attention to prisoner reentry at the federal, state, and local levels and the demand for knowing what works, the time is ripe for researchers and practitioners to work together to design and test innovative, research-based reentry programs.

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