The effects of sentencing policy on re-offending
A summary of evidence from 12 Campbell systematic reviews

Over 10 million people around the world are in penal institutions. That number has increased by 20% since 2000, faster than the rate of population growth. Politicians in many countries continue to call for policies which are tough on crime: more and longer sentences, and harsher prison regimes. Do such policies achieve a safer society? Or does prison have a criminogenic effect, making it more likely that ex-prisoners will continue a life of crime?

Overall the evidence shows that recidivism by offenders given non-custodial sentences is no higher, if not lower, than those given custodial sentences. The evidence from four randomised controlled trials shows no difference in recidivism for offenders given custodial and non-custodial sentences. Nine studies comparing groups given custodial and non-custodial sentences find lower re-offending amongst those given non-custodial sentences. However, despite the statistical matching methods used to ensure these are comparable groups in terms of factors such as background and offence, it is possible that the effect arises from courts giving custodial sentences to those most likely to re-offend, rather than demonstrating a criminogenic effect of prisons.

Avoiding reaching court helps. Formal processing of young offenders and pre-court disposals managed by the police, which divert offenders from the criminal justice system rather than prosecuting them, can lead to reduced re-offending.

The brief in brief
Prison populations are growing around the world. However, custodial sentences do not reduce recidivism by any more than non-custodial approaches, which are cheaper and have fewer consequences for offenders’ families. Diverting offenders before they enter the system is likely to produce less offending. Harsh prison regimes such as boot camps are not effective. Evidence also shows that programmes focused on specific issues such as drug use and sex offenders reduce recidivism.
Turning to the question of the nature of the prison regime, militaristic boot camps have no effect in reducing re-offending rates compared to ‘business-as usual’ prison regimes. This is true both for offenders in general and drug offenders. Boot camps also have a negligible effect on drug use. Whilst not a sentencing policy, “scared straight” – which exposes young people to prison life – is a popular “tough on crime” approach in the USA. Randomised controlled trials show that scared straight programmes have the opposite effect to that intended: the young people taking part are more likely to become criminals.

Interventions focused on the nature of the offense are effective:

- Drug courts monitor drug-involved offenders’ abstinence from drug use through frequent drug testing and compliance with individualised drug treatment programmes. Offenders referred to the courts have a re-offending rate of 37% compared to 50% for comparable offenders not participating in drug courts.

- Incarceration-based drug treatment programmes have a modest effect in reducing recidivism. Therapeutic communities have the strongest effect amongst drug users.

- Cognitive-behavioural programmes for sex offenders significantly reduce re-offending. The mean effect equates to a reduction in recidivism by over a quarter: a sexual recidivism rate of 10.1% in treated sex offenders versus 13.7% in the comparison groups.

- Restorative justice conferencing (RJC) involves face-to-face meetings of offenders and victims, forcing offenders to face the consequences of their actions. RJC significantly reduces re-offending and increases victims’ satisfaction with the handling of their cases.

An exception to the general success of targeted approaches are court-mandated batterer intervention programmes which adopt psychoeducational methods to get men to take responsibility for their sexist beliefs and stop abusing their partners by teaching them alternative responses for handling their anger. These programmes are not successful in reducing re-assault among men convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence.

Overall, there is no evidence that custodial sentences make for a safer society. Moreover, prison comes with higher financial costs, and social and economic costs for prisoners and their families.

Formal processing of young offenders and pre-court disposals managed by the police, which divert offenders from the criminal justice system rather than prosecuting them, can lead to reduced re-offending.
Included Campbell reviews


Wilson, DB, Brennan, I, Olghahere, A. and Kimbrell, C Police Initiated diversion to prevent future delinquent behaviour (Forthcoming).


Other references


About Campbell

The Campbell Collaboration is an international network devoted to producing a world library of systematic reviews of research to inform social policy and practice decisions.

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