

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Get out of jail hopeless

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PEOPLE who commit crimes in Massachusetts tend to read poorly, lack marketable skills, and have serious substance-abuse problems or mental illnesses. Merely putting them on ice for a few years isn't likely to fix those problems - or promote better behavior upon their release.

Public safety depends upon making sure released prisoners can earn a living outside jail. But to judge from a new report by the Crime and Justice Institute, a local research group, such opportunities appear to be lacking in Massachusetts, where the corrections budget is approaching \$1 billion a year and more than half of released inmates re-offend within three years.

While about 97 percent of inmates are eventually released, many go free after finishing out their entire sentences. In practice, this means that more than 40 percent of released offenders lack supervision - such as from a parole or probation officer. Rules barring them from public housing developments limit where ex-felons can live, and the widespread use of criminal-background data severely limits the number of jobs for which they are eligible.

These rules exist for understandable reasons. At a recent panel discussion on prisoner reentry, Representative Eugene O'Flaherty reminded the audience that public housing residents can't easily move and might want to avoid living among known gang members and drug offenders. He also said family businesses might reasonably hesitate to hire ex-felons.

But they need to live and work somewhere. Police and jailers see what happens when ex-cons lack options.

At the panel, Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis noted that the areas of the city where homicides are most frequent are also the main destination for released inmates. Some law enforcement agencies are trying to fill the vacuum of support services for ex-cons. "Who would have thought," Hampden County Sheriff Michael Ashe asked, "we would have housing specialists and job developers working for sheriffs?"

Public policy needs to be judged by its results, and corrections policy is no exception. The Crime and Justice Institute report calls upon the state to set a goal to reduce recidivism and report on its progress annually.

Lower re-offense rates should reduce criminal justice costs over time; indeed, the research group projects that a 1 percent drop in recidivism could translate, in theory, to \$4.3 million in savings. But such vital steps as mandatory supervision of prisoners after their release carry some costs up front.

It's worth the money. The threat that ex-cons pose to public safety declines if the state can ease them back into society. ■