

Recidivism Down in Washington State

Local News

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Posted on : April 13, 2011 at 8:53 am

OLYMPIA, Wash. - A study conducted by the Pew Center on the States found that fewer offenders in Washington return to prison after they complete their sentence. It also found that more Washington offenders who are supervised in the community are placed into custody when they violate the terms of their supervision.

"Both trend lines are going in the right direction for public safety," said Eldon Vail, Secretary of the Department of Corrections. "The Pew study reinforces what other studies have shown, which is that the work we've done in Washington to reduce recidivism in prisons is paying off."

The study, titled "State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons," found that between 1999 and 2004 the rate at which offenders in Washington return to prison for committing a new felony within three years declined from 27 percent to 23 percent. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy defines recidivism differently than Pew does, but both show the trend line for recidivism in Washington is on the decline.

"What's interesting here is that the recidivism rate declined even as the offender population became higher risk to commit a new crime," Vail said. "It shows that the work our staff has done to prepare offenders to be successful once they complete their prison sentence is making a difference."

Washington ranks 42nd in the nation for incarceration, meaning it confines a relatively small number of people. About 70 percent of offenders in Washington prisons are serving time for a violent crime. About half of the remaining 30 percent have previously been convicted of a violent crime.

"We focus our resources on the state's highest-risk offenders," Vail said. "Our recidivism rate would be even lower if we incarcerated more low-risk offenders, but that's not what's best for public safety."

The Pew study notes a national trend of increased incarceration over the past 30 years, but Washington did not follow the national trend. Due in large part to sentencing alternatives for drug offenders and guidance from the state Sentencing Guideline Commission, Washington's prison population did not increase at the same rate as most other states.

Washington currently houses about 17,000 offenders in 12 prisons. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy has estimated that Washington's prison population would be about 25,000 today had it kept up with the national incarceration trend.

"The prison population in our state didn't soar along with the rest of the nation because our lawmakers passed laws that made the public safer, not laws that only put more people in prison," Vail said.

Prisons Director Bernie Warner noted the recommendations in the Pew study — measuring and rewarding progress, beginning reentry efforts on an offender's first day in prison and optimizing supervision resources — are actions that Washington has taken for years.

"We've known for years that focusing on reentry makes the public safer," Warner said. "That's why we've made it such a priority in our agency." Meanwhile, the percentage of offenders who are confined for violating the terms of their community

supervision increased from 6 percent to 19 percent. That is due in large part to a state law that went into effect in 2000 that created a hearing process led by the Department of Corrections so that offenders would not have to go back through the courts when they are accused of violations.

“The purpose of that law was to help us hold offenders more accountable for their actions while they are on community supervision, and that’s exactly what happened,” said Anmarie Aylward, Assistant Secretary of the Community Corrections Division.