Correctional Rehabilitation: Recycle, Reduce, Reuse?

By Meg Bower

Sustainability in corrections usually calls to mind engineering innovations that capture and re-use energy in a new way. We think of buildings, structures and how to make them more efficient. We envision “Jetsons” buildings, with complex systems of futuristic panels, windmills and water conduits working together to form the most efficient building systems possible.

It is easy to focus on these solid, tangible, quantifiable pieces of hardware, to measure and estimate the cost savings and to propose realistic lifecycle costs for their implementation.

It is easy to turn away from the single-greatest challenge in sustainability (but also the greatest opportunity for cost savings in the correctional context): the successful recycling of the vast human capital, of the energy and creativity, of the vigor and passion that resides within our prisons and jails.

When I entered the unique arena of correctional planning more than 20 years ago, a colleague (also a lawyer) instructed me on the difference between jail and prison. Jully, he said, was not supposed to be punitive. It was meant to protect society and assure appearance in court of the defendant. Prison, on the other hand, was punishment. It was the court-mandated debt to society, to be paid in days, weeks, months, or years of time.

and tallied a per-inmate cost of $60,076, including facility, staff and benefit costs, according to the True Cost of Prisons Survey.

There is no doubt that incarceration is being overused in this country and that our states can no longer handle the cost. Beyond the direct costs of facilities and operations, there is a growing belief that lost income taxes, lost payments into Social Security and Medicare, lost property taxes and lost productive industry create an even higher indirect financial cost due to loss of productivity. And then there is the social cost.

Reducing the use of incarceration requires deep scrutiny to ensure that the correct individuals are being incarcerated. As my colleague (also a lawyer) said, jail should only be used pre-trial to protect citizens from potential danger and to ensure appearance. Sentenced alternatives abound where treatment offers a better solution, and minor offenses are being decriminalized.

“Recycle” means continuing efforts should filter and prioritize cases warranting incarceration from those that do not.

Recycle

Recycling implies offering new approaches to known challenges. Evidence-based programming revolves around individual assessments and a range of programs, including life skills, vocational training, education, mental health support and addiction treatment. Despite the acknowledged agreement of the value of inmate programs, there is no specific “best practice” inventory of rehabilitative programs for prisons to include.

Awareness, funding, staff resources, space or geography can limit prison programs. One of the greatest barriers to expanded programming is a continued prioritization of housing. Even where ample programs exist, inmate access can be limited by awareness, custody level, inadequate program capacity, inmate conflicts with other participants or timing conflicts with work or education.

Recycling challenges us to set a new high goal for prison programming — to strive to return individuals to society not just marginally better than when they entered prison, but as healthy, whole, healed persons.

Acknowledging the need to provide inmates with better tools and skills for handling life's challenges, prisons have shifted toward rehabilitation. Warehousing is — ideologically, at least — a thing of the past. But there are still significant barriers to reintegrating former inmates that many fail to recognize.

Successfully reintegrating formerly incarcerated human beings into society is not a new challenge. What is new is the lens of sustainability, the possibility of a planet with finite resources and the increasing awareness that true sustainability includes all those precious resources — even people.

Since the focus of this issue is sustainability, I wanted to go back to the something that kicked off our nation’s first broad-scale sustainability initiative from the 1970s — that iconic triad of arrows that tell us to “Recycle, Reduce, Reuse” — to see if it offers new insights and benchmarks for correctional rehabilitation.

Reduce

Fact: The U.S. incarcerates 695 people for every 100,000 residents. Despite a level of crime comparable to that of other stable, internally secure, industrialized nations, the United States has an incarceration rate higher than that of Turkmenistan, a country criticized by the U.S. State Department for its authoritarian regime, according to the Vera Institute of Justice’s True Cost of Prisons Survey.

The cost burden of incarceration is significant. The State of New York published a Fact Sheet in January 2012 documenting the many costs of high incarceration with pending parolees.

After release, fear and prejudice make employment challenging. One way to avoid this barrier is by “hiding” the incarceration. Policy initiatives to remove the convicted-felon checkbox from employment applications are in progress nationwide, as part of the National Employment Law Project. Another approach is to network former inmates openly into jobs with employers open to former inmates through groups like Volunteers of America (VOA).

Still, without success on this path, 800,000 individuals per year will continue to be non-productive, even after release.

Recycle

Recycling implies offering new approaches to known challenges. Evidence-based programming revolves around individual assessments and a range of programs, including life skills, vocational training, education, mental health support and addiction treatment. Despite the acknowledged agreement of the value of inmate programs, there is no specific “best practice” inventory of rehabilitative programs for prisons to include.

Awareness, funding, staff resources, space or geography can limit prison programs. One of the greatest barriers to expanded programming is a continued prioritization of housing. Even where ample programs exist, inmate access can be limited by awareness, custody level, inadequate program capacity, inmate conflicts with other participants or timing conflicts with work or education.

Recycling challenges us to set a new high goal for prison programming — to strive to return individuals to society not just marginally better than when they entered prison, but as healthy, whole, healed persons.

Social research, most of it conducted in the past decade, has documented significant collateral costs to incarceration, ranging from an impact on the individual’s lifelong earning potential to a generational transfer associated with the children of incarcerated parents’ increased likelihood to be expelled or suspended from school, to be homeless, and to ultimately have lower economic success later in life. These impacts ripple outward, even after release.

Most of us feel a societal detachment from sentenced individuals. They have failed; we have voted them off our island, and this is, from our perspective, is the end of their story. “Reuse” is hard because it requires us to either engage or be complicit with society’s failure to allow success after release.

Vast numbers (nearly 600,000 in 2005) of incarcerated individuals are released every year, to continue their story as a part of society. Reintegration is challenging.

In Nebraska, most former prison inmates who recidivate do so within 12 months of release. Environmental factors contribute, such as homelessness, family friction or unemployment.

Community social support agencies and pre-release planning can help former inmates work through housing and interpersonal issues. Multi-agency case management systems such as Iowa’s Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) offer a rich knowledge base between law enforcement, courts, prison and community providing the full history of an individual’s issues, challenges and treatments to all agencies the individual may touch after release, enabling proactive in-reach.

Meg Bower, AICP, LEED BD+C, is a senior associate at Dewberry.