

The Crime Report | (<https://thecrimereport.org/2017/07/20/want-to-end-mass-incarceration-fix-probation-and-parole/>)

Want to Shrink Our Prisons? Fix Probation and Parole

By **Bruce Western and Vincent Schiraldi** | July 20, 2017



Photo by hollow sidewalks via Flickr

In our nation's expanding discussion about eliminating mass incarceration, advocates, researchers and the media are missing a major contributor to incarcerated populations and a partial deprivation of liberty in its own right.

Mass supervision through probation and parole.

Grouped under the category of "community corrections," America's probation and parole systems originated in the 19th century as Progressive-era rehabilitative alternatives to incarceration. But they have effectively become feeder systems for imprisonment.

Today, with a caseload of over 4.7 million—one out of every 52 U.S. adults—community corrections agencies supervise more than twice as many people as the 2.2 million Americans behind bars.

What's worse, every year, almost as many people

<http://criminology.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-239#acrefore-9780190264079-e-239-div2-5>) enter our prisons, not because of a conviction for a new crime, but because of a violation of some condition of probation or parole.

That is why, over the past three years, a group of prosecutors, law enforcement officials, corrections and community corrections leaders, formerly incarcerated people, service providers, philanthropists and researchers have been meeting in an Executive Session at the Harvard Kennedy School to discuss what went wrong with community corrections, and what can be done to fix it.

Toward that end, the Executive Session created an unprecedented consensus paper



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(<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/wiener/programs/criminaljustice/research-publications/executive-session-on-community-corrections/publications/toward-an-approach-to-community-corrections-for-the-21st-century>) that includes 13 proposals to reduce the footprint of community corrections, have it hew more toward justice, and make it more effective in protecting the community and empowering people to turn their lives around.

There was strong agreement with the conclusion that “America’s community corrections systems do not live up to the core principles of providing well-being and safety, parsimony (no more punishment than is needed to achieve the goals of sentencing) and justice, successful community integration, victim restoration, and respect for human dignity.”

The paper went on to declare:

“Rather than serving as an alternative to, or release valve from, imprisonment, community corrections has become a contributing factor to incarceration’s growth...Major changes are needed to make our system smaller and more focused, less punitive, more humane, and more widely guided by best practices. It will be impossible to meaningfully reduce mass incarceration in America without solving the challenges of community corrections and fulfilling its initial purpose and promise.”

The paper’s proposals include moving “from mass supervision to focused supervision” and “from punishing failure to promoting success.”

Besides the principle of refraining from unnecessary state supervision, there were some practical arguments for reducing the criminal justice footprint. Indeed, shrinking probation and parole supervision, and focusing it on those most in need, can have results that some might find surprising.

When New York City reduced its use of probation by 69% from 1996 to 2014, public safety was not compromised. Half as many New Yorkers went to jail and prison during that time period (https://www.hks.harvard.edu/ocpa/cms/files/criminal-justice/research-publications/fsr2901_04_greeneschiraldi.pdf) (a trend that has even accelerated since), and violent crime fell city-wide by 57%.

Likewise, when Arizona policymakers created incentives for people (<http://www.pewtrusts.org/>) on probation to earn time off their terms for complying with court-ordered conditions and gave probation departments fiscal incentives to reduce probation revocations, new felony convictions amongst people on probation fell by 31% and revocations to prison fell by 28%.



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The Executive Session also found that the “community” is often absent from “community corrections,” as too many interactions between staff and people under supervision occur across a desk in an unfriendly, citadel-like and out-of-the-way government office. As such, the Executive Session recommended that community corrections move “from isolated to integrated” and “from fortress to community-based.”

Despite the fact that research shows that communities are safer if they are more cohesive and people do better under supervision when it is viewed as fair and legitimate, too much of what passes for probation and parole supervision amounts to an exercise in “trail ‘em, nail ‘em, and jail ‘em.”

Community corrections too often neglects community— and fails to correct.

To combat this mentality, the Georgia Department of Community Supervision (<http://www.georgiapolicy.org/2012/11/end-of-an-era-georgia-begins-to-close-parole-offices/>) did away with its staff offices, so now parole officers meet with their charges in clients’ neighborhoods. New York City partnered with non-profit organizations (http://www.nyc.gov/html/prob/downloads/pdf/dop_progress_report.pdf) so people on probation now see their probation officers in supportive locations in their own neighborhoods like drug treatment programs, organizations designed to help formerly incarcerated people with reentry and even YMCAs.

Community corrections too often neglects community— and fails to correct.

If America is to truly rid itself of mass incarceration, we have to make our probation and parole systems more integrative, less reflexively punitive, and pillars of the just principles of a democratic society.

Editor's Note: This week is national Pretrial, Probation and Parole Supervision Week. For more information please read [here](https://www.appa-net.org/PPP-Supervision-Week/)

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