

# The Potential of Community Corrections to Improve Safety and Reduce Incarceration

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REPORT SUMMARY

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS?

Community corrections supervises people who are under the authority of the criminal justice system but who are not in prison or jail. This includes two distinct populations: defendants charged with offenses but who are presumed innocent until proven otherwise, and offenders who have been deemed responsible for an offense by a court of law. Most people under community supervision fall into one of the following categories:

- > Defendants on pretrial release with open, active cases in court;
- > Defendants with open cases who have been diverted to a specialty court or diversion program and who will be convicted and sentenced if they are not successful in the court or program;
- > Offenders who have pled or were found guilty of their charges and are sentenced to a term of community supervision, usually probation, that may include participation in specialized programs like drug courts;
- > Offenders who have completed prison or jail terms but remain on community supervision, usually parole but also probation, for a certain amount of time; and
- > Offenders released from prison or jail to serve the remainders of their sentences in the community on work release or other programs (this may involve probation or parole supervision).

With this report, Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections provides an overview of the state of community corrections (which encompasses probation, parole, and pretrial supervision), the transformational practices emerging in the field, and recommendations to policymakers on realizing the full value of community supervision to taxpayers and communities.

In the last 40 years, the number of people confined in state prisons—sometimes referred to as institutional corrections—has increased more than 700 percent, reaching 1.4 million in 2010. In the wake of the 2008 recession, states and counties grappling with widening budget shortfalls have frequently targeted institutional corrections for cuts. This has led to changes in sentencing law and policy designed to move inmates out of expensive prison and jail beds and into community corrections.

While mass incarceration has received significant attention in the media, less well known is how many offenders are sent to community supervision. In 2009, seven out of every ten offenders were serving all or part of their sentences in the community, a rate that has remained roughly the same over the last 30 years. This currently amounts to a very large number, however, as during this period the total number of people involved in the criminal justice system has risen considerably. In 2009, 5.1 million—or one out of every 45 adults in the United States—was under some form of criminal justice supervision in the community.

Community corrections agencies that incorporate practices supported by good research, have adequate resources for staff and services, and enjoy the understanding and support of the courts and policymakers have the potential to achieve great results. These agencies face significant pressure to ease strained budgets, reduce institutional crowding, and provide a greater return on public safety dollars. Policymakers and the public need to understand what is possible for them to achieve and what it will take to get there; in particular:

- > a major change in the culture that has dominated supervision agencies for 30 years;
- > an investment of resources to enable agencies to adopt evidence-based practices;
- > a realistic plan for agency transformation;
- > a commitment to monitor and measure outcomes and what works; and
- > an understanding among the courts, legislature, and executive-branch agencies of their role in enabling supervision agencies to deliver on public safety expectations.

## For More Information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.

Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections works with government leaders to advance criminal justice policies that promote fairness, protect public safety, and ensure that resources are used efficiently. The center draws on the skills and expertise of its staff, as well as the practical knowledge of working criminal justice professionals who face similar justice challenges.

For more information about the Center on Sentencing and Corrections, please contact Peggy McGarry at (212) 376-3131 or [pmcgarry@vera.org](mailto:pmcgarry@vera.org).

Read the complete report:  
[www.vera.org/potential-of-community-corrections](http://www.vera.org/potential-of-community-corrections)

## EMERGING BEST PRACTICES: SUPERVISION BASED ON RISK LEVEL

Research over many decades has demonstrated that supervision and intervention resources are used to best effect on those who pose the highest risk to public safety. Two case studies illustrate this in action:

**DELAWARE:** A unified system (one of only a handful in which the state has custody of both pretrial and sentenced populations), Delaware is in the process of adopting a pretrial risk assessment instrument to inform detention and release decisions with the intention of holding fewer low-risk defendants and freeing resources for high-risk populations. Delaware is using this and other changes to spend its limited public safety dollars on programming that addresses offenders' risks and needs more comprehensively. Furthermore, through earned compliance credits Delaware has created an incentive for probationers to comply with supervision conditions in exchange for a reduction in their probation terms.

**GEORGIA:** The Georgia Department of Corrections is utilizing technology to monitor its low-risk offenders. Low-risk probationers are required to call into an automated system at a probation reporting contact center (PRCC). Should a probationer provide nonstandard responses to the system's questions, the call is directed to his or her probation officer. This provides an incentive to probationers to comply with the rules of their probation in order to maintain or gain the liberties that PRCC offers. The system has allowed Georgia to allocate more resources and time to its high-risk probationers, thereby increasing public safety and improving supervision quality.

## RECENT POLICY CHANGES: MANDATORY USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

With wider dissemination of research findings on how to impact criminal behavior, legislatures are passing bills that require corrections agencies to direct funds to programs that employ evidence-based practices. In some states, such as Oregon, the legislation requires that a specific percentage of allocated funds be used for evidence-based programming. Efforts by other states include:

**ARKANSAS:** In 2011, Arkansas enacted the Public Safety Improvement Act, which requires the Department of Community Corrections to implement evidence-based practices across the agency. The law mandates the agency to use specific practices. For example, probation and parole officers must develop individualized case plans for everyone designated moderate- or high-risk by an assessment tool that targets interventions for specific criminal risk factors, such as antisocial thinking, low levels of education or employment, and substance abuse.

**WASHINGTON:** The state's Offender Accountability Act requires classifying offenders according to their risk for future offending and allows the Department of Corrections to deploy more staff and resources to the supervision of offenders identified higher risk. It also encourages the department to develop partnerships with local law enforcement and social services to provide appropriate services in the community.