Office of
Program Policy Analysis
And Government Accountability

Follow-Up Report on
Reincarceration in Florida's Prisons
Administered by the Department of Corrections

Abstract

- **In response to our initial report, the Department has taken steps to improve program data, has adopted a standard definition of recidivism, and has identified additional measures of program success.**

- **The Department's data verification efforts are currently focused on education data and less focused on other program data, such as substance abuse treatment data.**

- **The Department should expand its review of data to include substance abuse, wellness, and funded self-betterment programs.**

Purpose

In accordance with s. 11.45(7)(f), F.S., this follow-up report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Corrections in response to Report No. 95-06. This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the Department has addressed our findings and recommendations.

Background

The Legislature and the Department of Corrections have implemented a variety of strategies to deter an offender's return to prison for crimes committed after release from prison, which is referred to as recidivism. These efforts include crime control strategies, such as increasing the percentage of sentence served, and rehabilitative strategies, such as education and substance abuse treatment. Measuring recidivism is an important part of evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies. Our review of data on inmates released from 1986 to 1992 indicated that approximately two out of every five inmates return to prison within three years of release. However, we noted that the percentage of inmates returning to prison had decreased since the 1988-89 fiscal year.

Prior Findings

To effectively allocate limited resources, the Legislature needs to know which programs or policies are having a positive impact on reducing recidivism. We reported the following three main findings:

- Problems with the completeness and reliability of the Department's program participation and completion data impeded evaluating the effects of these programs and policies on reducing recidivism.

- The Department had not established a commonly accepted measurement of recidivism. Different Department documents used different measures of recidivism.

- While recidivism provides valuable information on inmate post-release success, the Department should identify additional program success measures, such as educational gain, attitudinal changes, and post-release employment success.

Current Status

Since the release of our report, the Department has made several changes to address our findings. The Department has implemented a new data collection system and a monitoring process to improve data accuracy and completeness. The Department has also adopted a standard definition for measuring recidivism for all of its programs. Finally, the Department has identified measures of program success other than recidivism, such as academic gain,

institutional adjustment, and post-release employment success.

Actions Taken

Data Completeness and Reliability. The Department has generally complied with our recommendation to improve the completeness and reliability of the program data in its database. However, program data verification efforts have primarily focused on education data.

In May 1996, the Department implemented a new data collection and entry system. This system includes a standardized roster for program data collection, improved data entry screens, and a common reference manual for using the entry screens. In addition, the Department has initiated two monitoring and auditing processes to verify program data completeness and reliability on an ongoing basis: the Monthly Auditing Report for Programs and including program data in the Management Review Program.

Monthly Auditing Report for Programs. The Department's Bureau of Research and Data Analysis conducts a monthly audit of eight education data variables and one substance abuse variable. Known as the Monthly Auditing Report for Programs (MARP), this audit allows the Department to identify illogical or inconsistent data entries. For example, MARP will identify a negative education test score incorrectly entered into the database.

Bureau staff notify each facility of the audit results and administrators at the facilities are then expected to correct errors within 90 days. As an additional check, staff reevaluate the data on a quarterly basis to ensure that errors are corrected. A July 1997 quarterly MARP check successfully identified only a dozen data entry errors from April to June 1997 that had not been corrected in the database.

Management Review Program. The Management Review Program, coordinated by the Department's Bureau of Internal Audit, is designed to provide an independent, risk-based appraisal of Department operations. Beginning in 1996, the Department added criteria to the program to assess the accuracy of education data collection and entry. In contrast to MARP, the Management Review Program compares the hard copy inmate files with the database information to ensure that the actual data has been correctly entered. For instance, management review staff compare data entered on the database to data collected on education enrollment rosters. The Department developed nine review standards pertaining to data collection and entry, all of which pertain to education data. For fiscal year 1996-97, the management review teams reported 16 instances of noncompliance with these standards for an error rate of 7.4%.

The main limitation of these data verification efforts is that neither provides an extensive review of program data for substance abuse treatment, funded self-betterment, or wellness programs. While these processes provide a thorough audit of education data variables, the Department cannot assure that other program data are equally accurate or complete. We recommend that the Department expand its data verification efforts for substance abuse, wellness, and funded self-betterment programs. Department staff reported that both the MARP and the management review process will be expanded in the future to include additional program data verification.

Measurement of Recidivism. The Department has complied with our recommendation to develop a standard procedure for measuring recidivism, but has chosen to use a different definition than the one used in our report. The Department defines recidivism as a return to prison or sentence to Community Supervision for a new crime occurring within 24 months of the offender's date of release from prison. The Department used this definition in its May 1995 and February 1997 recidivism studies.

The February 1997 study indicated that the recidivism rate for inmates released during the 1993-94 fiscal year was 18%. This represents a substantial decrease from the rate of 40% reported by the Department for inmates released during the 1988-89 fiscal year.

Additional Program Success Measures. The Department is in the process of complying with our recommendation to identify additional performance measures for correctional policies and programs. As part of its efforts to develop a performance-based budget for the 1998-99 fiscal year, the Department has identified a number of input, output, and outcome measures for its programs. These include measures of academic success, institutional adjustment, and post-release employment success.