

Prison misconduct findings shed light on crowding problem

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UT Dallas criminologist Dr. Robert Morris and doctoral student Erin Orrick won the 2012 William Simon/Anderson Publishing Outstanding Paper award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences for their article that shows offenders who return to prison on technical parole violations are far less likely to engage in prison misconduct.

The findings of the paper entitled, “Do Parole Technical Violations Pose a [Public Safety](#) Threat? An Analysis of Prison Misconduct,” could help decrease prison populations without putting a strain on public safety at a time when state and federal prisons are overcrowded and the operating costs of correctional facilities have soared.

“The idea behind the study was in response to the need for reductions in the [prison population](#),” said Morris, a professor in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences. “We need to know which candidates for release pose a minimal threat to public safety.”

Other criminologists have recommended that one way to decrease prison populations is by not having some parole violators, also known as technical violators, return to prison. A technical violation is when an offender violates a condition of their parole. Examples of technical violations range from failure to report to a parole officer or missing a curfew.

Between 1980 and 2000, state prisons experienced a seven-fold increase in the number of people returning to prison based on a technical parole

violations rather than a new criminal offense, according to the paper.

However, little research has been done about inmates' behavior after their parole is revoked and they return to prison. Morris and Orrick carried out the first analysis of its kind to determine whether technical violators are a threat to public safety by examining their behavior while incarcerated.

“There is a pretty good argument to be made that people who are most well-behaved while incarcerated may be better candidates for abstaining from crime once they get out,” Morris said.

The two researchers examined more than 15,000 disciplinary records of male inmates incarcerated between May 1, 2004 and May 31, 2006 in a large Southern state. They looked at three different types of prison misconduct related to property, violence and drugs. And they compared these misconduct types between offenders returning to prison for a second time based on a new crime they committed and technical violations.

“What we found was for each category of misconduct, technical violators were far less likely to engage in misconduct compared to those returning to prison for a new offense,” Morris said.

Orrick, a doctoral student in criminology, said the research could aid policymakers who are looking for ways to decrease prison costs without having a huge impact on public safety.

“If they're looking to reduce prison populations, this may be an easily identifiable group of offenders who could be released without producing some sort of subsequent increase in crime rates,” she said.

Morris said the analysis may lead to finding technical violators who are

good candidates for alternative sanctions or early release from [prison](#), which could save taxpayers money. On average, states spend more than \$22,000 per inmate each year. In 2010, there were more than 1.6 million people incarcerated in state and federal prisons.

Orrick and Morris will receive the award in March at the annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in New York City.

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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