



To Fix Rising Crime, Reform Parole and Probation

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When people think of public safety, they likely think of the men and women in blue out on patrol, stopping crimes. While police officers play a central role in keeping communities safe, there is another side of the equation—the parole and probation officers working with people after they serve their time. Supporting all sides of law enforcement is critical because 95% of prisoners are eventually released back into their communities.

Parole and probation are supposed to offer structured, low-cost supervision of former inmates leading law-abiding lives outside prison walls. However, like many government institutions, bureaucratic systems resistant to change make it difficult for officers to succeed. By directing state funding to those closest to the ground when they implement effective methods to increase successful parole and probation completion, Wisconsin can lower crime and support these law enforcement officers.

The costs of the supervision systems' failures are high—both in taxpayer dollars and public safety. In a typical year, Wisconsin revokes 5,500 people to prison from parole and probation, many of whom committed new crimes, costing taxpayers \$451 million per year.

The system does not have to work this way. Policies that reallocate state funding to incentivize innovation, local experimentation, and higher performance can help Wisconsin jumpstart sluggish parole and probation completion rates.

Unlike most reforms, which spend state dollars based on promised results, prescribe specific programs, or push dangerous offenders out of the system, a reform that only rewards parole and probation departments with additional funding if they reduce revocation rates is a true pay-for-performance model. Once funding is tied to increased public safety, local offices will have an incentive to get more people to complete their supervision sentences successfully.

Under this reform, rewards would be tied directly to the number of people a local parole or probation office can keep out of prison compared to their performance from recent years. Those direct cost savings to the state from lower incarceration would then go back to the successful offices for them to expand strategies that are making their communities safer. Alternatively, if criminal violations increase in a jurisdiction, the local office will not receive a reward.

What works in Lincoln County might not be what works in Racine County. That's why successful offices should be free to use their reward funds to address their unique local needs. Some offices could use the funds to upgrade outdated equipment and implement new technology. Others could expand the most successful rehabilitation programs, contract with online social workers, or fill officer vacancies to help manage caseloads. What matters is that they achieve results—and individual offices are in the best position to develop and implement the strategies to get there.

This approach is innovative, but one that has been proven to work around the country. California adopted a similar incentive program in 2009. As a result, just one year later, 23% fewer probationers had their supervision revoked, 53 out of 58 counties reduced their revocation rates, and statewide violent crime dropped more quickly than in any year in the previous decade. These reductions kept tens of thousands of people out of prison over the last decade, saving California taxpayers more than \$1 billion. Other states, like Illinois and Texas, also saw considerable success in lowering revocation rates and overall crime rates by using financial incentives.

This year, Arizona’s legislature passed the country’s most comprehensive probation incentive funding bill. As the bill’s sponsor Republican Representative Steve Kaiser wrote, “It’s simple – direct additional funding to county probation departments that succeed.”

Keeping communities safe should be Wisconsin legislators’ top priority—especially as crime spikes nationwide. A better parole and probation funding system based on outcomes will build momentum for ideas that work. This bottom-up approach will foster system-wide change and shift officer culture much better than any top-down policy. And with each passing year, Wisconsin should see falling crime, fewer people in prison, and millions in taxpayer savings.

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