In Thinking About “What Works,” What Works Best?

The Margaret Mead Address at the National Conference of the International Community Corrections Association

Presented by
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research for safer communities
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Jeremy Travis, Senior Fellow at The Urban Institute, presented the Margaret Mead Address at the National Conference of the International Community Corrections Association held in Indianapolis, Indiana on November 10, 2003.

Dear friends:

Thank you so much for the invitation to be with you this evening.

For nearly a half century, the International Community Corrections Association has been an important resource for practitioners in the community corrections arena. You bring together leaders from a variety of organizations around the world that provide critical services to individuals under criminal justice supervision. At a time in our country—and in other countries as well—when public officials are increasingly looking to community corrections professionals to deliver cost-effective services that promote public safety and support ex-offender reintegration, the ICCA serves as an invaluable network for distribution of information about best practices, new ideas, and proven technologies. I am delighted to be with you at this annual conference to learn from you, to express my respect for your work, to see first hand some of the exciting ideas you are testing and, perhaps most importantly, to see old friends.

I am deeply honored by your decision to award me the Margaret Mead Award for 2003. Over the past several years, a number of distinguished individuals—some in the criminal justice field, some from outside—have been recipients of this award. I am humbled to be in their presence.

For the past five years, I have devoted most of my professional energy to the issue of prisoner reentry. I have developed enormous respect for the criminal justice professionals who are working on reentry issues—on both sides of the prison walls—those who run corrections institutions, those like the ICCA members who administer programs to serve prisoners returning home, and the legions of private institutions who work with prisoners, their families, and the communities to which they return.

As I have become immersed in this work—and particularly as I have witnessed the rapid pace of innovation around the topic of prisoner reentry—I have increasingly found myself asking how we would measure progress in designing new approaches to prisoner reentry. So, I was particularly pleased to see that for many years the goal of the annual ICCA conference has been to focus on the question of “what works,” and to promote evidence-based practices. Accordingly, for my topic tonight, I have chosen to share some thoughts about our measures of effectiveness in the arena of corrections, prisoner reentry, and community corrections.

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1 For a listing of the Urban Institute’s projects and publication on prisoner reentry, see http://jpc.urban.org
THE “WHAT WORKS” MOVEMENT

For a number of reasons, I believe that the “what works” movement is one of the most important developments in our field. First, because criminal justice administrators spend taxpayers’ money, we have a fiscal obligation to run programs that produce value for their money. The public is entitled to hold us accountable for results, and we should not shirk from the expectation that we administer programs of demonstrable effectiveness. Second, because we provide services to individuals in need, we have a moral obligation to help not hurt those who place their trust in us or who are placed in our care by the criminal justice system. Just as doctors take an oath to do no harm, criminal justice professionals should ensure that the programs we offer do not make things worse and, in fact, result in improved life chances for our clients. Third, because we strive to be recognized as a profession, we need to develop standards of excellence and certify that our programs meet those standards. This kind of self-policing activity, found in every profession, requires commonly-accepted principles of practice, principles based on solid research.

Our field has made significant progress in advancing the “what works” agenda over the past several years. When I was Director of the National Institute of Justice, Congress directed the Justice Department to conduct a survey of the research literature to determine which programs were effective at preventing crime. We commissioned the University of Maryland to conduct this review and the report they produced—entitled “Crime Prevention: What Works, What Doesn’t and What’s Promising,” still stands as a landmark in our field.2

There have been several important developments in the “what works” movement since that report was published. The team from the University of Maryland created a scale for determining the rigor of program evaluations that has since been adopted in other fields. The Department of Education now uses a version of the Maryland scale to determine whether to fund programs on school safety and prevention of drug abuse. The Labour Government in Great Britain has taken the important next step by requiring that all programs offered in the prisons be certified as meeting standards of program effectiveness and program integrity. And, for the past decade, the ICCA has organized its annual conference around the theme of evidence-based practices.

We clearly need to promote the “what works” approach to programs in the corrections, reentry and community corrections fields. To do so, we need to work closely with the research community to design program evaluations that are rigorous and comprehensive. In turn, this requires that we explicitly embrace the goal of conducting evaluations based on random assignment of our clients. Every review of the literature in our field points out the lack of random trials. The best way to determine program effectiveness is to randomly assign potential clients to treatment groups and control groups. Without this methodology, virtually every finding of program impact will be open to criticism.

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We have come a long way since the pronouncement by Martinson and his colleagues in the mid-1970’s that “nothing works.” We now know that many programs inside and outside of prison are effective at reducing recidivism, cutting levels of substance abuse, and promoting the reintegration of offenders into the workplace, the family, and the community. But, truth be told, our evaluation literature is generally weak in its methodology, thin in the numbers of programs evaluated, and out of step with the cutting edge innovations in our field. We need to build upon the consensus regarding the “what works” imperative and sponsor a new generation of rigorous, comprehensive, and long-term program evaluations.

Yet, notwithstanding the success of the “what works” movement over the past several years, I think there are several limitations to this approach. Even if we sponsored dozens of new evaluations—even studies using the most rigorous methodology—I think we still need a much broader approach for determining the effectiveness of our work. Please do not get me wrong—I am a firm supporter of an agenda that builds more evidence of program effectiveness. But I still believe that the current strategy is deficient in three critical ways. First, I think we focus too much on programs and not enough on people. Second, we typically use very limited measures of success. Third, we sometimes fail to measure outcomes in ways that matter most to the public. Let me take each of these critiques in turn.

**PROGRAMS VS. PEOPLE**

Every person in this room can rightfully claim to be successful in their lives. We have all overcome personal and professional obstacles, registered different levels of academic achievement, and been recognized for our contributions to our field, our family and our community. Whether large or small, our accomplishments are real. Yet, we would all also agree, I suspect, with the statement that it is very difficult to determine why we have been successful. Was it our education? Was it a particular mentor? Was it a period of therapy when we wrestled with deep emotional issues? Was it an attachment to a spiritual belief or a community of faith?

Just as we would have a hard time attributing our success to a single intervention, so too do offenders who “make it.” Some in this room would count among their greatest successes the fact that they are no longer involved in a criminal lifestyle. But my guess is that you would also chalk up that success to a variety of influences and personal attributes, not to a single program.

My point here is a simple one: As humans, we are more than the product of our programs. Our life’s path has been determined by multiple influences, large and small. So, when we evaluate criminal justice programs and ask whether they have “worked”—usually by asking whether program participants are less likely to be engaged in criminal activity—we should remember this phrase: We are more than a product of our programs. Although we may know a particular instance where everything clicked—where a single client found just the right program that turned his life around—the more likely scenario is that a program’s effects are small, may not be

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realized in the short term, may be counterbalanced by other influences, and may not provide the right ingredients at the right time.

There are two lessons here. First, we should have realistic expectations about program impact. If we find modest impact, we should celebrate that success. If we find no impact, that does not necessarily mean the program was of no value. It may mean that the impact could not be measured, or it may indeed mean the program did not work. Second, we should develop a much deeper understanding of the correlates of success and failure and build upon those insights. Let me give one example, citing three unrelated bodies of research. We know from longitudinal studies of desistance—the process of giving up criminal activity—that entering into a good marriage is one of the strongest predictors of desistance. Similarly, the Urban Institute’s Returning Home project, a longitudinal study in Maryland, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas where we interview prisoners before and after release from prison, as well as their families, is also yielding important lessons about the constructive role of families in successful reentry. Finally, the evaluation of La Bodega de la Familia, a demonstration project in New York City, showed that providing support to the families of drug users under criminal justice supervision could reduce the offender’s level of drug use, even though the offender him or herself did not participate in any special drug treatment program. These three research insights strongly suggest that we should work to strengthen families if we want to improve outcomes for our primary clients. Working with families is difficult work. We typically do not define family members as our clients. But we should recognize that a strong family can outlast any program and can work in ways that no one else can.

So, these research insights about the role of the family underscore the maxim that we are not a product of our programs. Accordingly, an emphasis on promoting the “what works” agenda should embrace a broader understanding of the pathways of human development and the multiple influences on human behavior. We should resist the temptation to become “program-centric” in our definition of success.

LIMITED MEASURE OF SUCCESS

What do we mean when we say something “works”? Typically, we use a very straightforward metric of success. Did the program reduce the level of criminal behavior among program participants? Was there a lower rate of recidivism due to the program’s existence?

For many reasons I have come to the conclusion that our uses of recidivism as a measure of success are very problematic. In the final section of this talk, I will lay out my critique at greater length, but here I want to challenge us to think more broadly when we measure program impact.

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Margaret Mead Address, Jeremy Travis
Of course, recidivism is an important measure of our work, perhaps the most important. But community corrections programs have other goals, and progress in meeting those goals should be measured as well. I know a number of programs represented in this room keep track of many of these performance indicators, so I don’t mean to imply that these measures are rarely tracked, but let me still list some indicators of success that may be critical. The general heading I give these indicators is “measures of reintegration”—meaning measures of attachment, or reattachment, to the social institutions that are traditionally associated with desistance from crime. For example, we should track whether our clients are working? How many hours a week, at what wages, and with what job evaluations? Are our clients integrated into a family network, actively engaged in the networks of reciprocal support that define familial relationships? Are they involved in community activities, in a church, a block group, sports clubs, an ex-offender support organization? Are they sober and stable? Are they connected to appropriate health care providers and maintaining a program of treatment?

We do collect data on some of these indicators, but seldom do we look at all measures of reintegration. Sometimes we don’t even collect the obvious data. In conducting a review of in-prison job training programs recently, I was struck by the fact that many of the evaluations of those programs tracked only recidivism measures, and not subsequent employment measures. So, at a minimum, programs should collect data about the aspects of behavior they expect to influence as well as recidivism.

A drug treatment program should collect data on sobriety and recidivism; an employment program should measure itself on job placements and recidivism; a parenting program should track the level of child support payments and recidivism. But we need to think more broadly. Our field needs to develop some common metrics of reintegration, in addition to the traditional recidivism measures, and use them to measure the success of our interventions. I offer one example of how this broader definition of impact can support our work. In the early years of the drug court movement, a drug court judge celebrated the birth of a child to a woman participating in his program. The judge and the client recognized that, but for the drug court program, this child would probably have been born addicted to drugs. This measure of program impact spread throughout the drug court network so that the national drug court program began routinely reporting on the babies born to drug court clients. Last time I looked, there were hundreds. Yes, drug courts reduce recidivism; yes, they reduce drug use; but they also result in healthy children born to sober mothers, a very important indicator of social reintegration.

I would like to add one new measure to our indicators of program effectiveness. In addition to tracking recidivism reductions and the metrics of reintegration, I think the community corrections field should develop measures of procedural justice. Allow me to explain. Prof. Tom Tyler, a professor of psychology at New York University, has studied enforcement mechanisms in a variety of contexts—when judges enforce court rules, when police enforce the criminal law, when code enforcement agencies invoke civil penalties.7 In all of these settings, Tyler has found two important, indeed surprising lessons. First, the way that rules are enforced is as important as the result of the enforcement activity in terms of building respect for the law. For example, if a police officer makes an arrest or issues a summons, we might think that the person on the receiving end of that enforcement action would be more or less upset depending on

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the severity of the sanction. It turns out that the critical ingredient in explaining the citizen’s reaction is the way the rule is enforced, not the result of the enforcement. If the police officer explains the reasons for the enforcement action, addresses the subject respectfully, and provides the subject an opportunity to ask questions, then the level of satisfaction for the enforcement process is high, irrespective of the severity of the sanction.

The second finding is even more important in my view. In those cases where the subject is treated respectfully, that person is more likely to obey the law in the future. Imagine the consequences of this research insight. If judges, police officers, probation and parole agents, corrections officers and other public and private agents of the justice system were more respectful, the level of compliance with the law would increase.

To the best of my knowledge, this body of research—called “procedural justice”—has never been applied to the community corrections field. But the implications are profound. Recognizing that hundreds of thousands of Americans are under community corrections supervision at any given time, a standard of excellence that embraces notions of procedural justice could have far-reaching effects. The respect for the rule of law could be enhanced. And the level of law-abiding behavior within this population could be increased. As the community corrections field struggles to demonstrate its value, I can think of no better new measure of effectiveness than to enhance the legitimacy of the law in the eyes of our clients. Added to recidivism and reintegration as measures of “what works,” a measure of procedural justice could represent an elevating aspiration for our field.

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

A third critique of the “what works” movement is that we focus too much on the programs administered by criminal justice agencies and not enough on issues of concern to the public. There are noteworthy examples of efforts to align our services more explicitly with the public’s expectations. For example, many community corrections agencies are experimenting with sanctions that are visible to the public and contain a measure of community restitution. These sanctions may or may not result in reductions in recidivism, but if they help restore public confidence in the criminal justice system and allow offenders to give back to the community, then they are performing a valuable function.

The most difficult challenge we face is to deliver on the public’s expectation that community corrections programs will enhance public safety. We recognize that the public’s expectations are often wildly unrealistic—the population we are supervising are inherently at high risk of committing new crimes and no amount of supervision or services will reduce that risk to zero. Nevertheless, I think we have failed to take up this challenge in creative ways. We think that simply by running high quality programs that reduce the level of recidivism among program participants, we can say we are significantly enhancing public safety. Here is where the current “what works” framework is most disappointing. Rather than asking whether programs “work” to meet socially desirable goals—even the expanded set of goals I have recommended—we should be asking what goals the public reasonably expects the criminal justice system to achieve and then finding ways to organize our organizational capacity to meet those goals.
The clearest example of our shortcoming in this regard is our failure to address the high levels of risk associated with the moment that a prisoner is released from prison. As you know, the Bureau of Justice Statistics recently reported that, within three years of their release from prison, two-thirds of former prisoners are rearrested for one or more serious crimes. But those arrests are not evenly distributed over the three-year period of the study. Nearly thirty percent of the released prisoners were arrested within the first six months after leaving prison. The cumulative total rose to about 44 percent within the first year, and almost 60 percent within the first two years. Clearly, the months right after release from prison present the highest risk to public safety.

Yet, we do little to align our resources and policies to meet the elevated risk around the moment of release. Too often, corrections agencies release prisoners in the middle of the night, in the worst parts of town, with no one to meet them. Too often, community corrections agencies and parole officers wait for newly released prisoners to find their way to their offices. And then they simply enroll the client in a program, refer him to services, or offer counseling, rather than offering intensives services at the time of greatest risk.

What if we aligned our services—including supervision and support services—with an explicit and ambitious goal in mind—to reduce, to the extent possible, the level of re-arrests within the first month after release from prison? What would that world look like? Would we not focus intensively on ensuring that every released prisoner had a safety plan, including strategies for avoiding his return to gang involvement, orders of protection for potential victims, and support from reformed ex-cons who could show him a better way? Wouldn’t we make sure that prisoners with histories of drug addiction were immediately placed in a treatment program so they could avoid the risk of relapse? Wouldn’t we avoid placing parolees in homeless shelters, rather than referring them to those shelters? Wouldn’t we construct supportive housing for the mentally ill, and transitional housing for those who need some time to get back on their feet? Wouldn’t we spend time with the families of soon-to-be-released prisoners making sure that they are prepared for the return of their family member, particularly on ways to handle the conflicts that inevitably arise? Wouldn’t we provide transitional employment for every returning prisoner who was ready to work but did not have a job? Wouldn’t we make sure that every returning prisoner with health conditions was connected to community health clinics, enrolled in Medicaid or other benefits programs, and continuing to receive medicine where appropriate? In short, wouldn’t we front load our services and interventions to the time of greatest risk, right after the release from prison, and do everything we could to make that transition as safe as possible?

But to be truthful, we do not organize our reentry activities this way. Because we do not, we fail to meet the public’s reasonable expectation that we will take the crime risks posed by returning prisoners seriously. Yes, we may administer programs and implement policies that “work” in the best sense of the “what works” tradition. We may even provide services that meet a broad definition of socially desirable goals. But until we seriously embrace the challenge of reducing the level of criminal activity by those entrusted to the supervision of community corrections agencies, we have not succeeded in our public mission.

The first step in tackling this challenge is to organize the criminal justice, law enforcement and social service agencies in your community to document the rearrest rate among returning prisoners; develop a coordinated strategy for reducing the risks faced by each returning prisoner drawing upon public agencies and private institutions such as churches and employers; present this strategy to your elected officials; develop a community collaboration to support its implementation in one neighborhood to prove its effectiveness; then expand it to other neighborhoods until this becomes business as usual. If this plan “works”—again, a good evaluation can provide independent documentation—you will have succeeded in meeting the public’s reasonable expectation that we will enhance the safety of their communities.

So, tonight I would like to leave you with these challenges—to build a robust set of practices that have been determined by the most rigorous research to be effective; to expand our definition of success to include measures of reintegration and procedural justice; and to organize the activities of the community corrections profession—in partnership with those who manage the prisons and jails of our society—to provide transitions from confinement that are marked by high levels of safety rather than elevated levels of recidivism. Of course, we ask a lot when we take on these challenges—and the odds of success may seem low. So I close with the words of Margaret Mead, after whom you have named the award you bestowed on me tonight: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” So, let’s change the world. I have no doubt that we can.