



WILSON SHEEHAN
LAB FOR ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES

CRIMINAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

Spring 2020



The issue

As of December 31, 2016, 6.6 million individuals were engaged in the adult correctional system in the United States, which is 2 percent of the US adult population. Of these individuals, 4.5 million were in community corrections through either the probation (3,673,100) or parole (874,800) systems. Of the more than 2 million incarcerated, over 740,000 were imprisoned in local city and county jails. Although the size of the prison population has received most of the national policy attention, this is less than a quarter of the population under the control of the U.S. correctional system. The remaining 77 percent of the correctional population are either on parole, probation, or held in local jails.

Today, we are experiencing a period of mass supervision. What occurs at the level of community corrections has a direct impact on the criminal justice system as a whole. As of 2016, the proportion of all prison admissions resulting from parole and probation violations was 31 percent, a six-fold increase since 1978. Solving the ongoing crisis of mass incarceration, then, must begin with a focus on community corrections. However, because systems of community corrections have not been the subject of significant research, many questions remain. What are the unique needs of those engaged in community corrections? How can these needs best be served? Why do so many individuals remain under community supervision? Why are they unable to break out of the system?



Call to action

Reducing recidivism and enabling those involved in systems of community corrections to lead full, dignified lives will occur at the community level. Today, the services offered by nonprofit and other private and public service organizations form the backbone of community corrections. Still, we know too little about the role communities play in supporting and transforming the lives of those in jail or on probation or parole. Through rigorous research, the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities

(LEO) aims to cultivate a better understanding of the specific needs of the community correctional population and seeks to identify the most effective ways service organizations can meet those needs. With the majority of policy attention focused on prison systems and prison reentry, LEO's Criminal Justice Initiative will approach the nation's most pressing criminal justice issues from the unique and underexplored angle of community corrections. LEO's approach will involve building evidence around new and existing programs in the community corrections space, especially those focused on community reintegration.

Specific research interests



1. Identifying and servicing the unique needs of those involved in community corrections, especially:
 - a. Appropriate mental health and substance abuse treatment;
 - b. Cognitive-behavioral therapy; and/or
 - c. Emerging therapies such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR).
2. Providing advocacy and holistic services for individuals under supervision, including:
 - a. Mentoring services, with a special interest in peer mentoring;
 - b. Case management; and/or
 - c. Reintegration, or bridging the gap between the outside community and the local criminal justice system.
3. Making more efficient use of existing programs by encouraging program take-up, persistence, and completion.
4. Identifying innovative and cost-effective interventions that help to reduce recidivism and improve individuals' compliance with the terms of probation and parole, such as:
 - a. The efficacy of GPS monitoring and other novel supervisory tools;
 - b. Text-messaging nudge reminders for those on probation and parole;
 - c. The accessibility and mobility of parole officers in meeting the logistics needs of those on community supervision; and/or
 - d. The impact of positive incentives on compliance.
5. Improving outcomes for the families of people under supervision, including:
 - a. Directly servicing the families of those in community corrections;
 - b. Addressing the trauma of having a parent, spouse, or another family member in jail; and/or
 - c. Improving the parenting skills of people about to be released and helping them reintegrate into their communities and families.



Our process

To build evidence in response to the research interests outlined above, the Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) will partner with innovative nonprofit and government organizations across the United States through the creation of a Criminal Justice Cohort. Specifically, LEO seeks to partner with organizations that are looking to reduce the number of individuals

involved in systems of community corrections and improve the life outcomes of those already engaged. Organizations that are invited to participate in the Cohort will work with LEO researchers to design and launch 4-5 rigorous impact evaluations of new and existing interventions in the local criminal justice space. Upon the completion of these evaluations, LEO will disseminate findings to the broader criminal justice community, thereby contributing to the overall body of evidence used to fight poverty and criminal justice involvement.

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