



# News Release

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LANSING -- Contrary to popular belief, denying parole when people first become eligible does very little to reduce crime rates; people convicted of homicide and sex offenses rarely commit new crimes against people; and serving more time does not increase the likelihood of success upon release.

These are just some of the findings from research on prisoner release and recidivism in Michigan conducted by the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending (CAPPs), a Lansing-based public policy organization. A report on the study entitled "Denying parole at first eligibility: How much public safety does it actually buy?" was released today.

Said Barbara Levine, executive director of CAPPs:

"Reducing Michigan's prisoner population to save limited resources and effectively managing the risk of serious new crime by parolees are not contradictory goals. They require only a willingness to set reasonable expectations, to abandon assumptions not consistent with the evidence and to incarcerate only those parole-eligible prisoners who are objectively determined to pose a current threat to public safety."

The study, using Michigan Department of Corrections data, examined how much it actually improved public safety to continue incarcerating people who had completed their minimum sentences and were eligible for parole.

A total of 76,721 Michigan prisoners sentenced to indeterminate terms after 1981 and released for the first time between 1986 and 1999 were followed for four years to determine whether they came back to prison for a new crime or for a technical violation of parole conditions. The cases were divided into nine offense categories: homicide, sex, assault, robbery, larceny, burglary, drugs, weapons and motor vehicle

"The findings are similar to those of many other studies," Levine said. "However, it is useful to draw these conclusions from such a large quantity of Michigan data that covers such a long period of time, especially since parole board policies changed sharply mid-way through the study period. Focusing on the substantial differences among offense groups is important for cost-effective parole decision making and reentry planning."

Among the findings are:

- While 18% returned to prison with a new sentence within four years of their release, only 4.5% were returned for a new crime against a person. Returns for larceny, drugs and burglary were by far the most common.
- Reoffense rates vary widely by crime type. People who commit financially motivated crimes are the most likely to return to prison. Only 3% of sex offenders returned for a new sex offense and less than

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1% of homicide offenders returned for another homicide.

- Overall, 61% were released when first eligible but that also varied widely by offense. About 30% were kept one or two additional years, then released. The people with the lowest reoffense rates were most likely to be denied parole.

- Sheer length of time served was not associated with success upon release, although older age, lack of prior prison terms and good institutional conduct were.

CAPPS estimates that if everyone denied parole for up to two years had been released when first eligible, on average, it would have saved more than 2,300 beds a year. The overall rate of returns with new sentences would have increased by only 1.7 points. Annual arrests would have increased by less than 0.4%.

These findings, CAPPS says, have numerous implications for corrections policies, including:

- A presumption of parole upon completion of the minimum sentence for all prisoners, subject to individualized risk assessments, would avoid unnecessarily imprisoning people who have served their punishment and are at low risk for reoffending. It would also save tens of millions of dollars a year.

- The use of sentence reductions or community placements as incentives for good behavior would not reduce public safety and might increase it by encouraging self-discipline and program participation in prison and by promoting structured reentry to the community.

- The application of stringent supervision conditions to whole categories of parolees and of employment and residence barriers to whole categories of people with criminal convictions is not necessary to protect the public.

- Since the majority of former prisoners will not reoffend in any event, reentry efforts will be most cost-effective if targeted at the people who are at highest risk, such as those who committed financially motivated crimes or who need treatment for mental illness or substance abuse.

“Lengthy incarceration for the sake of being punitive is not a reasonable crime control strategy,” Levine said. “We must stop confusing the seriousness of a person’s past crime with the risk that he or she will commit a new one. We routinely incarcerate thousands of people who have served their minimum sentences and would not pose a threat to anyone. The cost to prisoners, their families and taxpayers is enormous.”

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The complete study can be found at the CAPPS website: [www.capps-mi.org/recidivismstudy](http://www.capps-mi.org/recidivismstudy)