

TOWARDS A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING DECARCERATION

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INVESTMENTS

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REIMAGINE JUSTICE

For 60 years, the United States has engaged in a marked period of disinvestment from social service provision in the public sphere.¹ Inequitable access to education, employment, housing, healthcare, and social support programs has contributed to the rise of mass incarceration as a backend catch-all for failures of social policy.² There is an urgent need to decarcerate—to reduce our reliance on the criminal legal system as a means to surveil and punish—as this reliance contributes to a cyclical public health crisis and exacerbates limited access to these services.

Yet, we know little about how to effectively decarcerate while reinvesting resources to community-led health and safety initiatives. What effects do community-based interventions have on criminal legal system interactions? Which interventions can be considered empirically sound models for decarceration? Our team set out to answer these questions by conducting a scoping review of over 23,000 abstracts in the literature.

HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND

1. Early childhood investments that emphasized parental support significantly reduced criminal legal interactions in adulthood.

A sound research body consistently found that two different models of such investments—intensive, “active learning” preschool programming that included wraparound services focused on parental involvement, as well as nurse–family partnerships that provided topical training to parents—reduced arrests 20+ years after the intervention.

2. Transitional employment support during reentry was effective only when assistance led to stable, gainful employment.

Future interaction with the legal system was reduced by programs that matched a reentering person with a community-based job placement specialist who called potential employers to vouch for fitness, assisted in resume creation, and helped find job openings. Such programming was more effective than those that simply provided low-skill, temporary jobs.

3. Multisystemic Therapy (MST) was more effective in decarceration efforts than standalone cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

MST—CBT in combination with wraparound services like family therapy—reduced likelihood of future criminal behavior in young people more than CBT without additional services.

WHAT WE STILL DON'T KNOW

Perhaps the most striking finding of this review, the dearth of research in this field leaves many questions about “what works?” unanswered. Moving forward, the research–bureaucracy apparatus must be undone and funding must be re-oriented to community-led solutions, with the goal of creating more data equity. □

¹ Hinton, Elizabeth. 2014. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² Travis, Jeremy, Bruce Western, and Steve Redburn, eds. 2014. *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.