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Why Should We Care About Recidivism? (Part II)

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In 2005, there were over 126,022 acts of violent crimes in the state of Florida that included murder, forcible sex, robbery, and aggravated assault. If national statistics are any indication, about 45 percent of those violent crimes will be solved. About 68 percent of the people being incarcerated for those violent crimes were already convicted felons.

Florida has had about 20 years of get tuff on crime. In that period, recidivism has gone from a low of 34 percent in 1988 to a high of 57.5 percent in 1995. ⁱ Since 2000, the recidivism rate has settled in at about 47 percent. ⁱⁱ

Percentages at times may seem exoteric or dry and sometimes brute numbers give a better perspective. In the year 2005, 39,939 of 84,901 inmates had served previous time in Florida state prisons. ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important to realize that the incarceration rates we are talking of in Florida are only about men, women and children that have served time in Florida prisons. Those that have previous convictions that include time served in county jails or out of state are not included. Then there are those felons that go on to do time in other states. It helps to understand that nationally, the recidivism rate is between 68 and 75 percent.

In simplistic terms, getting tuff on crime means nothing more than turning our prisons into institutions where men and women are put on 'ice' by isolating them from the public for a period of time. In even simpler terms, they are given a time out from society by the courts and the state is providing them with medical attention, room and board.

What no one is talking about is that doing time has turned our prisons into institutions of criminality. No where in these numbers is any indication that being tuff on crime is having an impact on the total prison population.

There is every indication that being tuff on crime has made prison a viable alternative to being on the street. A look at the exploding geriatric prison population stands in mute testimony to this proposition.

Florida's inmates are among the lowest academic skill levels and highest disability and illiteracy rates of any segment in Florida. They have an average education of less than the 7th grade and no professional skills

Upon completing their sentence, most inmates re-enter society no more skilled than when they left. Being released with a criminal record, no marketable skills, being functionally illiterate, and, few if any, transitional services available makes a return to criminality and eventually prison an attractive proposition.

Not surprisingly, statistics show that more than three-quarters of prisoners are recidivists caught in cycle recidivism. This cycle will cost the Florida tax payer \$2.25 billion in FY 2006/07 for the prison system alone. A figure that is more than doubled when including the cost of inmates in county jails throughout Florida.

What no one is computing is the cost in social services associated with such a large prison population and a correspondingly high recidivism rate. We are talking an average of two children per incarcerated inmate. We are paying the bill on everything from school lunches to Medicaid to housing and food stamps. Essentially, we are raising kids to follow in the footsteps of their incarcerated parents.

There are two particularly conspicuous groups of inmates not only because of their size but also because many inmates have a foot in both groups. The largest group of prisoners for the last five years is those convicted of drug crimes. The age group of 24 years and younger is another very visible group that comprises between 25 and 29 percent of all prison admission. These are the inmates most likely to return but return as violent felons because of the lack of viable alternatives.

The choices are simple. We can continue with the penal philosophy of 'hard time' and watch our prison system grow in size and costs. A viable alternative is to require prisoners to work their way out by earning a minimum of a degree and become licensed in a profession.

The starting point is a simple law that anyone convicted of a felony is automatically given a 25 year sentence. When they complete both education and professional license and meet minimum time served they are freed.

Education is not just cramming for a GED but going through all the grades to include end of year tests administered by outside and independent agencies. Also included is passage of all the FCATs.

This type of sentence will be particularly hard on foreigners involved in drug trafficking. They will have to first learn enough English to participate in educational programs.

Get convicted of another felony and it is an automatic 25 years unless the inmate can finance and enroll in a college level program.

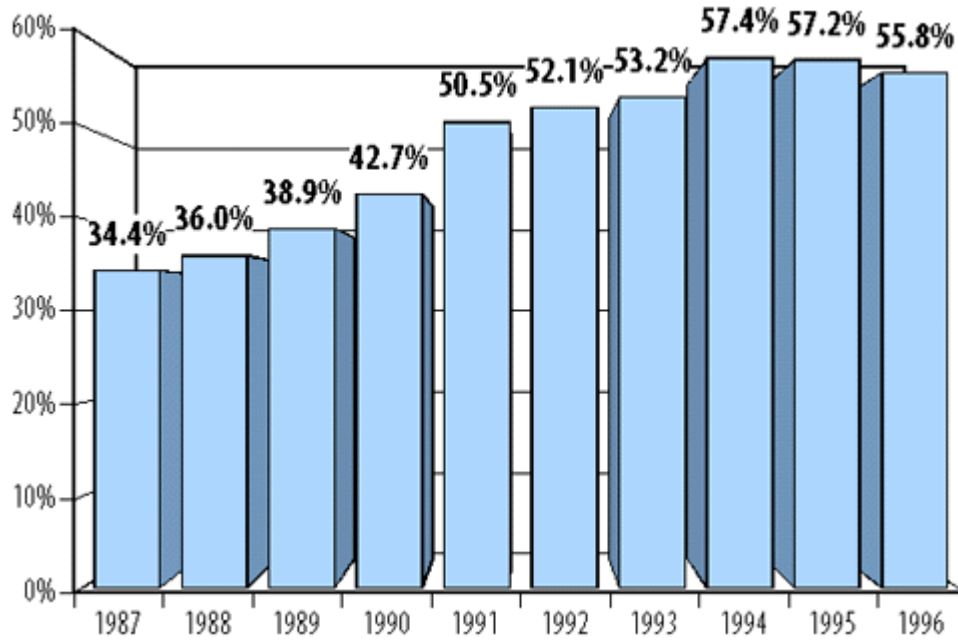
Chances are that the war on drugs will become a moot point as the price of drugs will skyrocket. Get caught selling or possessing any amount of drugs can quickly turn into a 25 year sentence instead of a slap on the wrist and a few months in the county jail.

A sentencing arrangement such as this is a very strong deterrent. Those that are predisposed to continue their lives of criminality will most likely move to other locals.

Costly: maybe but much less than paying for a second or third round of incarceration. A five year sentence will cost the state \$74,679 for a typical five year sentence on a second time around at today's prices.

Inmate Population on June 30, 1996

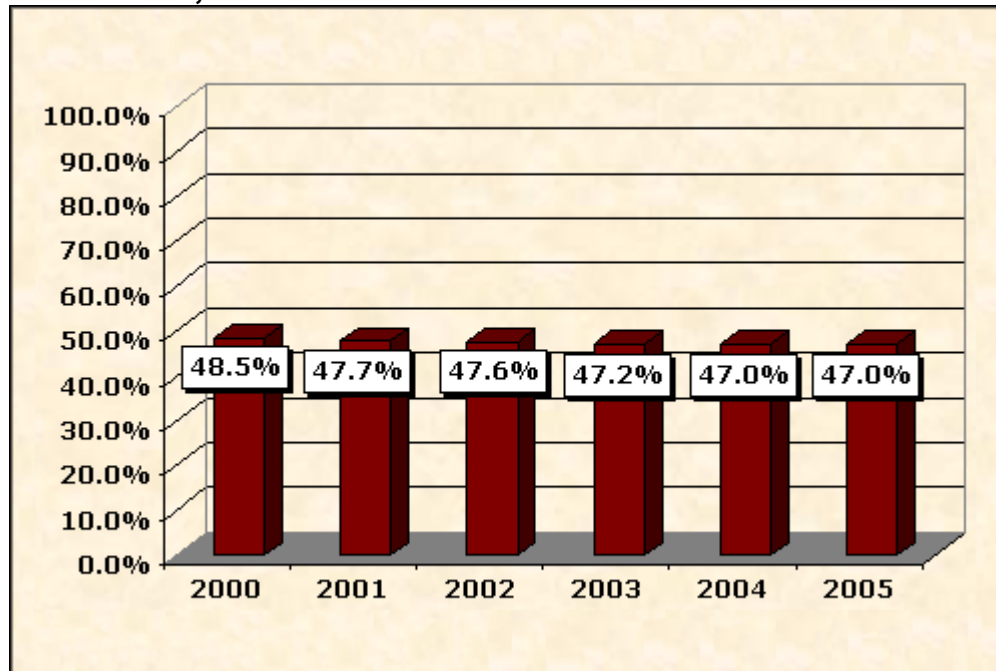
Percent of Inmate Population with Prior Commitments to Florida's Prison System



<http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/annual/9596/stats/ip4.html>

ⁱⁱ http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/annual/0405/stats/ip_prior.html

**PERCENT OF INMATE POPULATION
WITH PRIOR COMMITMENTS TO FLORIDA'S PRISON SYSTEM
ON JUNE 30, 2000-2005**



ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/annual/0405/stats/ip_prior.html

**Prior Commitments to the
Florida Department of Corrections
(Inmate Population on June 30, 2005)**

CATEGORY	WHITE MALES	WHITE FEMALES	BLACK MALES	BLACK FEMALES	OTHER MALES	OTHER FEMALES	TOTAL	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
None	22,153	2,362	17,157	1,318	1,752	220	44,962	53.0%	53.0%
1	6,872	403	9,247	420	384	37	17,363	20.5%	73.4%
2	3,172	183	5,637	247	178	13	9,430	11.1%	84.5%
3	1,721	70	3,667	162	77	4	5,701	6.7%	91.2%
4	990	37	2,380	96	38	3	3,544	4.2%	95.4%
5	493	11	1,381	42	13	0	1,940	2.3%	97.7%
6	248	9	824	23	2	0	1,106	1.3%	99.0%
7	82	4	396	7	0	0	489	0.6%	99.6%
8	38	0	168	4	0	0	210	0.2%	99.8%
9+	21	0	118	2	0	0	141	0.2%	100.0%
Data Unavailable	2	0	7	0	4	2	15		
TOTAL	35,792	3,079	40,982	2,321	2,448	279	84,901	100.0%	100.0%