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Nearly half of Dallas inmates return to jail within 3 years. Can officials change that?

Written by

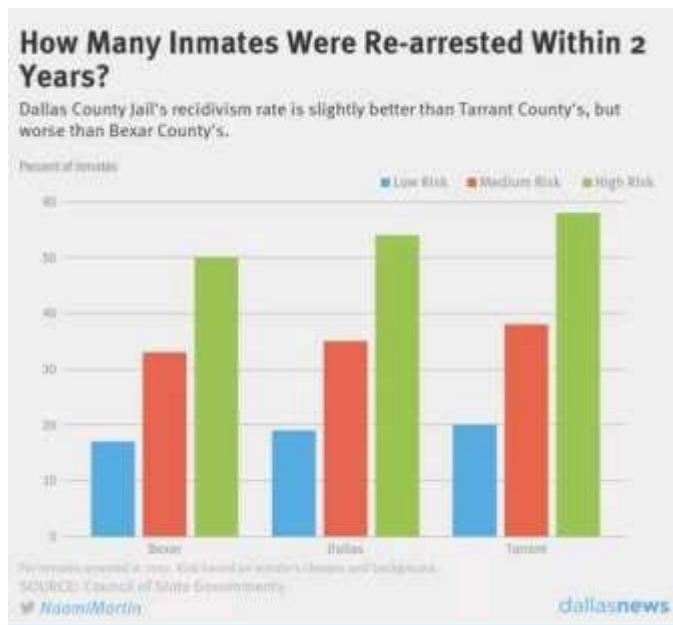


Naomi Martin

Jail is often called a revolving door, but now there's more hard evidence: Nearly half of Dallas County inmates are arrested again within three years of getting out, a new study says.

Dallas isn't alone in its high recidivism rate -- the county is largely in line with Bexar and Tarrant counties, according to the first-of-its-kind report by the Council of State Governments.

"I find it discouraging -- very discouraging," Ron Stretcher, Dallas County's criminal justice director, said Thursday. "We have to, as a state and a community, decide what we want out of incarceration and who needs to be incarcerated."



Officials plan to use the data to try to waste less money on things that don't work, and to better help criminals turn their lives around. Dallas, Bexar, El Paso, Tarrant and Harris counties all funded their own portions of the study, which tracked recidivism for inmates freed from 2011 through 2015.

The 90-page Dallas report made clear that solely locking people up doesn't change behavior on a large scale, said Stretcher and other criminal justice experts. Inmates benefit from learning life and job skills while behind bars. And when defendants are released, the more monitoring and support they receive, the better.

Among defendants who were released while awaiting trial, those who could afford commercial bonds were less likely to re-offend. The report analyzed nearly 26,000 detainees who were freed in 2011.

How many Dallas County arrestees were back in jail 3 years later?

Defendants who could afford commercial bail bonds were less likely to be arrested again.



The Dallas County inmates analyzed in 2015.
SOURCE: Council of State Governments
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About 40 percent of defendants released on commercial bonds were arrested again within three years. That's relatively low, compared with 44 percent of 'pretrial release' defendants, who couldn't afford commercial bonds and were supervised by the court, and 51 percent of those released on 'personal recognizance,' who were typically receiving addiction or mental health treatment.

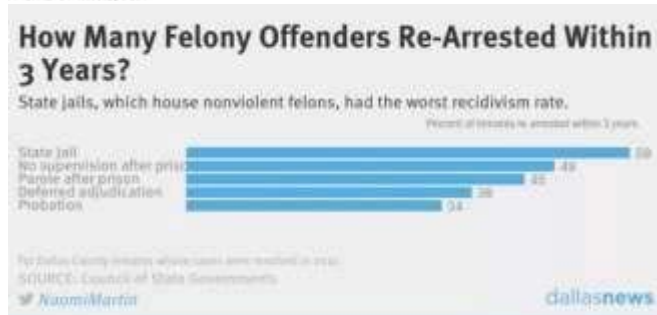
Those numbers aren't surprising, Stretcher said. Those who can afford commercial bonds tend to have more money and family support, which helps them stay on the right track.

Also, bail bond companies have a financial stake in monitoring their clients and making sure they check in regularly. Meanwhile, the court doesn't have enough staff to adequately supervise pretrial inmates, Stretcher said.

Defendants who accepted deferred adjudication were the least likely to return to jail. Deferred adjudication allows someone to plead guilty to a crime, complete probation requirements and then have the case dismissed. It works, experts said, because defendants are motivated to avoid a criminal record.

On the other hand, state jail prisoners were the most likely to be re-arrested. State jails performed worse than state prisons, where experts say there are more programs available that help straighten out criminals.

State jails house nonviolent felony offenders, such as those convicted of dealing drugs or stealing. State prisons house more serious, violent convicts. County jails house mostly pretrial defendants, though a large portion of the jail's population also serve their sentences there, mostly for misdemeanors.



About 59 percent of state jail prisoners were back behind bars within three years, compared with 38 percent of those on deferred adjudication, 34 percent of those on probation, 45 percent of those on parole, and 49 percent of those released from prison without supervision.

Several experts, including Stretcher, said the state jails do a terrible job at helping offenders change their lives. Inmates are typically there for only six months or so and don't have time to reap the full benefits of programs. State jails also don't offer as many effective programs as state prisons, where violent criminals are sent. And parole isn't an option, so nobody monitors prisoners once they're released.

Officials at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which oversees state jails, declined to comment before they had a chance to read the report.

"More often than not, the person doesn't complete the programs and then they're released with no community supervision," said Doug Smith, a policy analyst at the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. "It's just a recipe for disaster."

Smith knows firsthand how difficult it can be to turn away from a life of crime. He was incarcerated for five years after committing robbery while addicted to drugs. While locked up, he took vocational classes, participated in a 12-step program and worked as a peer educator. Once he was released, his parole officer monitored him closely and kept him on track.

"I just said 'yes' to everything," Smith said. "It worked for me, but that doesn't mean it works for everyone. I hate that anyone has to go through what I went through."

The Dallas County Jail offers many programs to inmates. Prisoners can take classes in woodworking, manufacturing and gardening. They can earn community college credits. They can enroll in courses that teach domestic batterer intervention, addiction counseling, conflict resolution, parenting and problem solving.

Most programs are run by volunteers so they're not a drain on the sheriff's staff, said Maggie Sanchez, assistant director of inmate programs. But the jail faces a big challenge in that many low-level offenders are freed before they have a chance to complete the course.

"You see that progress with the inmate, and then they're gone," said Sanchez. "We see a lot of them come back. Our hope is that we don't, because we want them to be successful."

Once inmates are released, many struggle to find housing and a job, which is especially difficult with a criminal record. They often go back to their old neighborhoods, their old friends and social circles.

It can seem hopeless to try to get someone to change in the same environment, but it's possible with the right plan and support, said Christina Crain, president of Unlocking Doors, which connects ex-offenders with services.

Since she founded the organization in 2010, Crain said, she has seen success for hundreds of ex-cons who wanted to change their ways. The group's caseworkers customize progress plans and follow up on them. Unlocking Doors has about 2,000 clients in Dallas County. Crain said the government and private donors should invest more in re-entry services.

"Look, these people are coming back and they're going to be our neighbors," said Crain. "It's going to be a better world for us if we try to get them back on track. You help one person, you save a family. Plus, it's just the right thing to do."