

August 31, 2012, 12:19 p.m. ET

NY prison shock camps claim lower recidivism

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York corrections officials say they have graduated 45,000 inmates from military-style boot camp over the past 25 years and data shows that most don't commit new crimes.

Established around the country in the 1980s as an alternative to regular prison, the so-called "shock camps" got mixed reviews and several states dropped them. New York kept three camps going with a model they say is effective and cutting down the rate of repeat offenses and saving money.

Only prisoners convicted of nonviolent crimes who volunteer and sign contracts go to the camps. Many drop out or are kicked out before completing the six months of mandatory physical training, manual labor, education and drug counseling, scrutinized by drill instructors. The prize for completing the course is a shortened sentence.

"It's a highly disciplined program. There's orders you've got to follow every day," said Steven Wetmore. He completed the Monterey program in 2002 following DWI convictions and said most inmates choose it thinking it will be easier than their original sentence. "We started with a platoon of 46 and 23 graduated."

Some observers say the lower recidivism is predictable because it's a self-selected and motivated group of inmates who prove capable of finishing the program. They also note that the lower recidivism, far lower in the first year, starts rising after that.

"Our view is that it's somewhat mixed, but there are definitely some positive elements to it," said Jack Beck, who directs the visiting project for the Correctional Association of New York. "The regimentation is so different from what these individuals will experience on the outside, it's very hard to translate those experiences into something when they return home."

New York has 1,087 inmates at the shock camps, Moriah in the Adirondacks, Lakeview in western New York's Chautauqua County, and Monterey in the Finger Lakes region. All are minimum-security without fences and set in rural areas. Before the state shut the Summit camp southwest of Albany in 2011 to save money, there were 1,284 offenders in the shock program. The system has some 56,000 inmates in 60 correctional facilities, down from a peak 71,600 in 1999.

Revisions in drug sentencing laws and diverting more inmates to treatment programs have reduced the available pool for shock programs. Initially intended for prisoners up to age 23, they have been opened to inmates up to age 50 with less than three years left on their sentences.

Corrections spokeswoman Linda Foglia said they estimate having saved \$1.34 billion because of the shortened incarceration for 45,135 shock graduates, including 3,355 females, over the past 25 years.

Meanwhile, New York data show 7 percent of those who completed the program from 2007 to 2009 returned to prison within one year, compared to 19.9 percent of all inmates released from state prison. Recidivism data after three years show a 26.4 percent return rate for those who completed shock in 2007, compared with 42 percent for all releases that year.

Wetmore, 44, said the work at Monterey included raking leaves at a park, picking up trash along highways and shoveling manure. His physical training concluded with a 10-mile run. He said he felt a religious calling after a drill instructor chose him to give testimony to visiting youths, went to college and became a counselor. He now works at the corrections department's Willard addiction treatment center.

After a 2007 visit to Lakeview, the correctional association, which advocates for inmates, issued a report saying 75 percent of those surveyed expressed satisfaction with the program, "a rate much higher than other prisons we have visited."

The group cited concerns about the apparent high tension level, physical and verbal confrontations and inmates complaining about a teamwork system where an entire platoon could be disciplined for one individual disobeying an order, though it noted few formal prisoner grievances. Counselors and instructors can issue "instant corrective actions" like pushups or running laps.

A 2003 National Institute of Justice research review said boot camps proliferated nationally starting in the late 1980s, with 75 adult programs by 1995. Five years later, one-third had closed and there was a 30 percent population drop in remaining state programs.

While "almost universally successful improving inmates' attitudes and behavior during the course of the program," the review said those changes did not translate to reduced recidivism, with limited exceptions. Boot camps that lasted longer, like New York's six months, and offered more intensive treatment and post-release supervision, did better.

In New York's shock program, addiction counseling is mandatory for everyone, unlike the general prison population, corrections spokeswoman Carole Weaver said. The state's parole program now sets the level of supervision based on an individual assessment of his or her risk of reoffending, she said.

—Copyright 2012 Associated Press