

The New York Times

December 28, 2012

Keeping Parolees Out of Prison

To cut state corrections costs, which have quadrupled over the last decade to about \$52 billion annually, many states are remaking “hair-trigger” parole systems that send large numbers of people back to jail, not for new crimes but for technical violations like failing a drug test or missing an appointment with a parole officer.

Encouraged by the federal Second Chance Act of 2008, which aims to promote correctional reform, several states have cut recidivism by giving newly released inmates access to drug treatment or mental health care, focusing parole supervision on the riskiest offenders, and developing a system of community-based sanctions that sends only troubled or repeat offenders back to prison.

Data released late last month by the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics suggest that the reforms are already cutting the numbers of parolees who are bounced back to prison for minor infractions.

According to [the study](#), of the more than 500,000 parolees who left supervision each year, 32 percent were reincarcerated in 2011, compared with 36 percent in 2008 — which means about 30,000 fewer parolees sent back to prison last year than three years earlier. It is likely that the reduction saved the states something in the neighborhood of \$150 million in corrections costs last year alone.

There is still a long way to go in this area. States that are serious about reducing recidivism need to do away with the thousands of laws and regulations that punish ex-offenders by making it difficult for them to find jobs, homes and basic work credentials like driver’s and occupational licenses. Creating rational parole and probation systems, which can save enormous amounts of money, is just one step in that process.