

Rockefeller drug law reform put politics, science in sync

By MICHAEL REMPEL, Commentary

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After decades of tough-on-crime policies, treatment in lieu of prison has emerged as a surprisingly easy sell, from liberals who believe in rehabilitation to conservatives who are aghast at the cost of incarceration.

One sign of the new political consensus is the reform of New York's Rockefeller drug laws in 2009.

According to a new study by the [Center for Court Innovation](#) and NPC Research, in the first year after reform, courts in New York sent nearly 1,400 more drug-addicted felony offenders to treatment, an increase of 77 percent from the year before.

Digging deeper, the study also found great variations across New York's 62 counties. While there was no change in some places, treatment enrollment increased by more than 200 percent in 13 counties, with the largest single increase a rise from seven to 326 treatment cases in Nassau.

The study also found that the kinds of offenders receiving treatment as a result of Rockefeller reform were a more challenging population: They had more serious drug use histories and more prior convictions.

Criminologists have long found that high-risk offenders are more likely to benefit from intensive interventions like long-term drug treatment than low-risk offenders, who are better off when left alone to do what most of them would have done anyway — namely, not re-offend.

Since Rockefeller reform reached the right target population, recidivism rates declined. And lower recidivism leads to resource savings: an estimated \$5,144 per offender.

The Rockefeller reform is a rare example of politics being in sync with science.

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