

New York's boot-camp prisons get the boot

by [Joanna Walters](#) @joannawalters13 December 9, 2013 5:30AM ET

The Shock Incarceration Program was a model for the nation, but this ground-breaking prison alternative is under threat



Inmates drill at the the Lakeview Shock Correctional Facility in upstate New York in October. Non-violent offenders can reduce their sentences by volunteering for the six month program. Andrew Lichtenstein



Since New York first opened a shock prison in 1987, 45,000 inmates have completed the six-month program. Andrew Lichtenstein



An inmate polishes his boots. Every moment of the inmates' day is structured, down to the minute. Andrew Lichtenstein



Before leaving the dorm, inmates use a military cadence to mark themselves as present, as in "1,2, 3,..." Andrew Lichtenstein



Inmates are required to keep their lockers perfectly organized. Andrew Lichtenstein



The prison combines strict military discipline with intensive physical training, vocational classes and substance abuse programs. Andrew Lichtenstein



Mandatory physical training begins every morning at 5:45 am. Andrew Lichtenstein



The prisoners do morning exercises. Andrew Lichtenstein



Carrying a rock throughout the day is one of the prison's form of punishment. Andrew Lichtenstein



The men are practicing a complex drill that they will perform for the graduation ceremony the next day. Andrew Lichtenstein



Inmates line up for a meal. Andrew Lichtenstein



One form of punishment requires that inmates wear a sash that publicly declares their infraction; another is to be forced to eat standing up. Andrew Lichtenstein



Inmates (in this case, the women residents) must leave the cafeteria with the plastic eating utensil aloft. They will drop it into a bin before exiting. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



The tray indicates this inmate's infraction. As punishment he must carry it. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



Graphics like this, reminding inmates where to stand when approaching a desk to ask request something of a corrections officer can be found all over the property. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



An inmate pleads at an administrative hearing to be allowed to stay in the program after she got into a verbal argument with another inmate. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



Smoke breaks are one of the rare moments when inmates are not strictly supervised, and even then they must take the break still in formation. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



Prisoners who have completed the six month program congratulate each other. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



After completing the program and changing into civilian clothes, former prisoners enter into the final prison gate to leave. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



A mother just released from prison is reunited with her children. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America



Fred Simmons on the morning of graduation day from the Shock Incarceration Program Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

Fred Simmons hoped he would be the next Jay Z or 50 Cent. That could still happen, but right now he's on his face on the cold ground in a chilly wind, dressed in prison fatigues, doing push-ups.

"Motivated!" yells a drill instructor aka prison guard.

"Motivated, motivated, motivated, Sir," yell 400 inmates spaced out across a large parade ground.

It's not yet six on this October morning, and the sun won't rise for another 90 minutes. By then the inmates will have completed a five-mile run inside the double perimeter of razor wire, jogging in groups called platoons, singing military chants.

The rest of their day will be structured down to the minute, including several hours of hard labor until lights out in a large dormitory at 9.30 p.m.

This is New York state's Shock Incarceration Program — often known as correctional boot camp — at its flagship Lakeview prison upstate, on the shore of Lake Erie.

The program allows convicts who are serving up to three years for non-violent, non-sexual crimes to opt out of prison and sign up instead for an intensive, six-month stint in one of the state's shock incarceration prisons, designed to recondition them physically and mentally through a mixture of military-style training, group counseling, alcohol and substance abuse treatment, education and vocational skills workshops. Once they successfully complete the program, there is a period of intense post-release supervision of ex-inmates that includes frequent check-ins with parole officers and some assistance in job-hunting and continued substance abuse counseling, though critics say that this aspect is not as robust as it could be.

Since New York's shock prisons began in 1987, 45,000 inmates — 93 percent of them men — have completed the program. The recidivism rate for shock graduates is significantly lower than for the general prison population, saving public money and making the state the flagship boot-camp system in the country.

But the specialized program is shrinking fast because of changes in drug laws and the waning of the boot-camp trend nationwide after poor results in other states.

Experts are now calling for an about-face to revitalize New York's shock system rather than reduce it further, and to spread some of its best practices to ordinary prisons.

I'm trying to get home to see my wife and baby son. I missed his first steps, his first words and his first birthday. I don't intend to miss his second birthday.

Fred Simmons

"I thought I was special, invincible. I grew up thinking the drug dealers on my streets were glamorous," Simmons said. He got into rapping and making underground DVDs of hip-hop artists, including 50 Cent, improvising in their studios. (Fitty, as the hip hop superstar is also known, is one of the program's most famous former inmates; he went through the shock program at Monterey prison in the Finger Lakes region at the age of 19.)

"It was, literally, a shock arriving here," Simmons said. "They shaved my goatee and buzzed my head. There's an exact way that you have to do every tiny thing, from the way you take a shower to the way you sit in a chair."

Controversial military-style discipline alone is not what makes shock incarceration effective, however; it's the combination of routine, education and rehab that ends up clicking with the majority of inmates and makes them less likely to turn back to crime in future.

"I've lost 20 pounds and learned to get up early and move with a purpose," said Simmons. "I used to smoke weed all day and stay out all night. Obviously I don't do that anymore."

The 32-year-old aspiring rapper is small-framed and soft-spoken, but he says he cut an intimidating figure as a drug dealer on the streets of South Jamaica, Queens, in New York City. It was a lucrative business — until he was convicted of weapon and drug possession last May.

"I've learned to humble myself here, and I've been forced to think about ... what part I played in getting myself incarcerated," Simmons said. "I'm trying to get home to see my wife and baby son. I missed his first steps, his first words and his first birthday. I don't intend to miss his second birthday."

"NY shock is a national gem"

New York state is proud of the results of its boot-camp-cum-rehab program.

One year after release, 7 percent of the program's graduates find themselves back in prison, compared with 20 percent of inmates released from ordinary penitentiaries. Recidivism increases over time, so after three years of liberty, 26 percent of graduates are back behind bars — but that's still much lower than the 42 percent of inmates from standard facilities.

With its shorter incarceration periods and lower reoffending rates, the shock program has [saved state taxpayers](#) an estimated \$1.4 billion since its inception in 1987.

But despite its success, the program is now shrinking rapidly. Two out of the five shock facilities that the state ran until 2011 have now closed, one is slated for closure next year and one was saved from closure in 2011 only by a local lobbying campaign to save the jobs provided by the prison, with no guarantee it will not be closed at a later date. That leaves only the largest facility, Lakeview Shock Incarceration Center, unscathed, and the future of the program is increasingly uncertain.



Inmates chant during a drill Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

The number of shock inmates has shrunk by 42 percent since the height of the program from the mid-'90s to the mid-2000s, when it was a model for the rest of the country. There are now only 1,000 shock inmates in the three New York facilities still open.

This reflects a [rapid decrease in prison population](#) throughout the state due to changes in drug laws, but experts are urging the authorities to expand the shock system, not slash it.

"New York shock is a national gem," said Martin Horn, who teaches at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice and was previously the city commissioner of corrections and probation. "It would be wonderful if policy makers could learn from the New York experience, extract what's best and apply it elsewhere."

Until two years ago New York state had four dedicated Shock prisons and a section within another prison.

But since 2011, the state has closed the Summit Shock prison west of Albany and the Butler Shock facility northwest of Syracuse. Moriah Shock in the Adirondacks was slated for closure, but the decision was reversed, and the Monterey Shock prison will close next year.

To match the drop in crime and changes in sentencing policy, Governor Andrew Cuomo has shut 13 prisons since he was elected in 2011. If Moriah ultimately closes, too, that will leave just Lakeview, with almost 600 men and more than a hundred women in the state program.



Inmates in the cafeteria at Lakeview Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

"I (would) hate to see Monterey close and I would hate to see Moriah close," said Cheryl Clark, the former director of the Shock Incarceration Program, who helped develop it from its creation in 1987 until she retired in 2010. "They have improved lives and lowered the prison population.... You could introduce all the elements of the program — the holistic approach — for prisoners elsewhere serving longer terms. It wouldn't have to be an early-release program but could be a strategy to improve reoffending rates."

Horn says there are more prisoners currently in the state system who could be made eligible for shock incarceration with a change in the rules, including, controversially, those serving time for low-level violent crimes.

But the program is battling the odds.

The plummeting state prison population is fueled by the [widely-applauded repeal in 2009](#) of the '70s-era Rockefeller drug laws, which imposed mandatory-minimum and punitive sentences, even for relatively minor drug offenses.

I've worked in New York state corrections for 20 years in 11 prisons and this is the only job where I have felt ... I make a difference to inmates' prospects.

Capt. Walter Moss
Senior Staff, Lakeview

In the past four years, the pendulum has swung toward non-custodial penalties that focus on probation and treatment.

New York state [incarceration figures](#) are down from a peak of roughly 72,500 in 1999 to 55,000 last year. Among those, the number of drug felons has decreased from about 24,000 to 7,000 as of July.

Drug offenders make up the bulk of shock inmates, so the program could fall victim to a trend that is generally viewed in a positive light.

"I've worked in New York state corrections for 20 years in 11 prisons and this is the only job where I have felt really worthwhile and I make a difference to inmates' prospects," said Captain Walter Moss, one of the senior staff at Lakeview. "I'm not going to be there six months after they leave, when a friend is offering them \$500 to take a 'package' down the road. But the hope is they'll remember the 600 to 800 hours they spent with their counselors here, working on their impulses, their self-esteem and their decision-making skills and they'll think, '\$500 is not worth my freedom,' " he added.

Several state legislators are rallying to [keep Monterey open](#).

"The unique blend of counseling, education and treatment at our shock facilities have saved the state over a billion dollars ... (and) turned around numerous lives that were once at a dead end," said State Senator Tom O'Mara.

The future of shock

The shock program is partly a victim of its own success, as well as criminal justice policy. But its reputation has also been undermined by mistakes made elsewhere.

In the early to mid-'90s, when New York shock's lower recidivism rates made national headlines, many other states started their own versions of the program. Between 1990 and 1995, 75 adult boot camps opened in 30 states. But few other states dedicated the same resources to the educational and rehabilitation side, or staff training, as they did to the flashy military side, which proponents of New York's methods see as a fatal error.

Taken overall, national recidivism rates for the inmates in more limited boot-camp programs turned out to be no better than for the general prison population.

[Analysis](#) by the [National Institute of Justice](#) of a small sample of states praised New York and, to a lesser extent, Louisiana and Illinois for the results of their programs, but criticized Georgia, Florida, Texas, Oklahoma and South Carolina for their over-emphasis on the military drill and harsh conditions at the prisons and the lack of supervision of inmates upon release.

Instead of an effort to reinforce the best elements of the successful programs, there was, as a result, a sweeping conclusion that boot camp did not work, was too expensive and often led to inmate abuse.

The lead analyst for a series of NIJ reports, Dr. Doris MacKenzie, now at Penn State University's Justice Center for Research, said: "After the research came out and said the military aspect doesn't work, people lost interest. That's not true everywhere. New York is much more in the treatment model. It's a shame it wasn't spread in the way it could have been if other states had followed best practice."

By 2000 a third of the camps had shut down. Florida canceled its boot camp program after the death of a juvenile at a facility in 2006. Texas has now all but discontinued its own state-run boot camps.

"If you have a lot of other facilities doing it well, it strengthens the argument for boot camps, so it's been hard for New York to keep the support with fewer and fewer programs running elsewhere. When it's effective I absolutely believe it benefits society," said Dr. Ernest Cowles, a senior fellow with the Institute for Social Research at California State University, Sacramento.

Total reconditioning



Painted slogans cover the walls Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

To foster group loyalty over individuality, platoons of roughly 50 inmates march, work, learn, eat and can be punished together.

Inmates have no access to the Internet, television, radio, electronic devices, newspapers, magazines or books other than text books, religious and self-help books.

In unguarded moments, many inmates look depressed, despite the painted slogans like "Pain is temporary, pride is forever" that cover the walls.

The hard labor that is part of the inmates' routine can be as mild as painting a community meeting hall or as strenuous as using handsaws to cut up trees uprooted in storms.

But it's not just physical exertion; an important part of inmate counseling is group therapy.

A cluster of women is sitting in a circle in a room next to their dormitory. Each one is discussing a mistake she has made or a problem or regret that her incarceration has caused.



A cluster of women is sitting in a circle in a room next to their dormitory. Each one is discussing a mistake she has made or a problem or regret that her incarceration has caused. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

"I regret that I won't be home next month when my daughter gives birth to my first grandchild," one woman said.

"Putting the drugs before my friends and family and losing my apartment," said another.

"Leaving my kids behind," said a third.

"Letting a man control me," said the next, and there were murmurs of agreement around the circle.

Their crimes range from drug felonies to grand larceny, fraud and burglary, often committed to supply a habit.

Theresa Goldsmith is 43 and a second-time felon.

Her father is a professor at Cornell University and her mother was a high-school teacher. She grew up in Ithaca "with every chance," Goldsmith said. But she started taking cocaine, then dealing it and dropped out of college in her 20s.

"I've probably spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, but there's no mansion, no yacht to show for it," she said.

Meanwhile, Goldsmith's 3-year-old daughter is being raised by Goldsmith's sister, causing "an unbelievable pain of separation." Goldsmith's mother died in August of a rare disease, and Goldsmith wasn't permitted to see her before she passed. (Prisoners are not allowed out to visit a dying relative in the hospital or attend a funeral.)

While the Lakeview staff couldn't bend the rules, Goldsmith said they were a comfort. "The support that I've gotten here over this has been amazing," she said. Over in the education building, some inmates are in a literature class, while others study basic reading and math, or English as a second language. Some prepare to take their high-school equivalency test, others learn computer skills.

"We get inmates arriving who can barely read; they fell through the cracks at school," said acting education supervisor Gareth Sebouhian. "We typically see three to five years of progress in six months."

Down the corridor, male inmates are being taught electrical wiring, plumbing and construction skills; a women's class (the women and men are kept separate for all activities) is learning upholstery.

Graduation day



Francisco Perez prepares for graduation day Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

When inmates complete the [six-month program at Lakeview](#), a graduation ceremony is held to mark their achievement; 38 percent, on average, end up leaving prematurely for disciplinary or medical reasons, or simply poor performance and end up in a standard prison.

A fellow graduate of Fred Simmons is Francisco Perez, 36, from Park Slope in Brooklyn. He started using drugs, including heroin, as a teenager, and became a dealer, along with his younger brother. He was incarcerated in 2001 for drug possession. At one time, Lakeview would only accept first-time felons, but the program has since expanded to include repeat offenders and has upped its age limit from 25 to 50.

Perez was in Lakeview for a year; disciplinary problems and time out for court appearances delayed his progress.

"I had a really bad attitude when I came here. For example, I got into big arguments with a peer and we both paid for it and had to carry a two-man log together for a week. But I ended up getting on quite well with that peer," he said, grinning. "I nearly gave up a few times but I turned myself around and stuck it out I'm relieved to be graduating at last and proud to be going back to my folks."

His eyes filled with tears as he talked of missing his family and said he's not coming back to prison.

"I'm sick and tired of it. I'm done," he said. "It would be easy for me to go back to the dealing lifestyle but this place has taught me to think positive and value my family and, besides, the judge told me that if I'm caught again it will be 10 to 15 years."

Perez said he hopes to use the carpentry skills he's picked up at Lakeview to find work when he gets out.



Prisoners congratulate each other after finishing the six month program. Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

On graduation day, friends and family visited the compound to watch the hundred or so graduates put on a marching display. Then everyone listened to speeches and the graduates received certificates from Lakeview Superintendent Malcolm Cully.

After a standing ovation, Cully emphasized to new inmates that the graduates didn't give up, even when the going was tough, although all had likely had the urge to quit at some point.

One middle-aged couple, Barbara and Bob Griswold of the town of Parish, just north of Syracuse, look proud and tearful as they watch the ceremony. Waiting in the parking lot later for the inmates, the Griswolds say their son Robert, 33, was convicted of embezzlement. He stole

funds to feed a prescription painkiller addiction, losing his job and bringing shame to his family in their small community, the Griswolds said.

"It's been hell," said Mrs. Griswold.

"I will never stop loving my son but I was very angry," said Mr. Griswold. "I feel a sense of his accomplishment today, though."

Reshieka Mitchell, 33, from Niagara, is waiting for her boyfriend. He was at Lakeview for weapon possession. Mitchell herself graduated from Lakeview 12 years ago.

The things she recalls most clearly about the program are a drill instructor kicking gravel in her face while she cried, and learning decision-making skills at the counseling and cognitive-behavioral-therapy sessions.

She relapsed once, smoking weed on parole and ended up back in general prison for 13 months. But she's been going straight since 2008, she said, and now works for a catering business.

"Here they come!" shouted a young woman with a small baby. The graduates trickled into the parking lot.

Robert Griswold is enveloped by his mother.

Some graduates boarded a bus. Others walked away by themselves.

"What comes after is hardest," said Deborah Watkins, Lakeview's deputy director of treatment and counseling programs. "Those with strong family support do best. Those going back to dysfunctional street life can struggle. Some only have a shelter to go to." Close parole supervision is a vital follow-up, she added.

Life on the outside

One week after graduating, Francisco Perez walked into Junior's restaurant in Brooklyn.

He was beaming and dapper, already cultivating a beard.

He had just met his parole officer, given a urine sample to test for drugs and was going to attend an outpatient addiction-counseling session that afternoon.

He had been paroled to his older sister's address in nearby Gowanus and, until he found work, she would be supporting him financially from her pay as a school bus matron.

Perez would be under curfew between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. "Parole can call on me any time or sit outside my house to make sure I'm here," he said. He said he intended to look for a job soon. "One day at a time," Perez said.

The system used to provide more intensive post-release supervision, called After Shock, with extra resources in New York City, where two-thirds of the state's shock inmates are from. Each graduate would have a pair of parole officers, who each had half the caseload of a regular parole officer. And there used to be more state and federal funds for addiction counseling, as well as job-hunting assistance.

"It's not the same any more, down to budget constraints," said Superintendent Cully.

Martin Horn said, "Ex-inmates found the extra services very helpful, especially to continue with sobriety."

Figures were not available from the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to confirm the details of budget decreases; DOCCS declined to comment.

My drill instructor sat with us for a long time and warned us it would be difficult on the outside. I don't think I took that seriously enough.

Theresa Goldsmith

Graduate of the Shock Incarceration Program

After graduating from Lakeview, Theresa Goldsmith was living with a friend in Utica; she must meet certain standards before she is allowed to live with her daughter again.

Three weeks later, she was struggling. Goldsmith was waiting for acceptance into an addiction program and waiting to see an agency that could help her update her résumé. She would have to wait 45 days before her Medicaid coverage would kick in and she was disheartened after walking into 15 branches of McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants and failing to get a minimum-wage job.

Idle time felt "dangerous," she said. "My drill instructor sat with us for a long time and warned us it would be difficult on the outside. I don't think I took that seriously enough."

How easy would it be for her to go back to selling drugs?

"Oh, it could happen instantly. My dad is terrified for me. But I'm not going to do that," she said.

The next day, Goldsmith was ecstatic.

"I got a job!" she said breathlessly.

The Utica Memorial Auditorium, a major sports and music venue in town needed cleaning staff and had hired her on the spot.



Fred Simmons a few days after his release from shock prison, back at his parents' home in South Jamaica, Queens, with his wife Andrew Lichtenstein for Al Jazeera America

Meanwhile, in South Jamaica, Fred Simmons opened the door to his parents' house.

He's obliged to live there until the family court says he can move back in with his wife and their two children.

"50 Cent was raised five minutes from here," he said, pointing down the block, where a police surveillance pod is perched above the street.

Since Fitty's time in Monterey Shock, he's had numerous brushes with the law and had [just agreed to a plea deal](#) over domestic violence charges in Los Angeles, but thus far had managed to avoid going back to prison.

Simmons had been talking to music industry contacts about work since his release.

"But these particular people are nothing to do with the things I was doing on the street before," he said.

Simmons's father, Fred Simmons Sr., is glad to have his son at home. "I hope Lakeview has taught him a lesson," he said.

Three weeks later, Simmons was accepted into a union-run brick-laying apprenticeship that his wife signed him up for.

"They all deserve a fighting chance," said Simmons Sr.