

## National Crime Prevention Council

Research and Evaluation Department Research Brief – September 18, 2008

## **Private Prisons and Recidivism Rates**

**Summary:** With the number of people being incarcerated on the rise, the private sector stepped in to help alleviate the burden by building private prisons. Given that Americans typically subscribe to the idea that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector, the foundation of this study was that the private sector would be able to provide better incarceration services than state governments.

**Sample:** Between June 1, 1997 and May 31, 2001, 22,359 state prison inmates were released from state and private prisons in Oklahoma. There were 23,114 cases total in the study (some prisoners recidivated and were released again within the study period).

## **Key Findings:**

- There was a higher rate of recidivism among inmates released from private prisons (32.8%) than from state prisons (29.8%).
- When controlling for gender, men in private prisons were more likely to recidivate (35.1%) than state prisoners (30.1%) and women in private prisons were less likely to recidivate (21.2%) than those in state prisons (26.8%).
- Inmates in the private prisons differed from state prison inmates in several ways:
  - o They were younger, on average
  - o They had shorter sentences
  - o They served less time
  - o They were more likely to be released on probation
  - o They were more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses

**Discussion:** Several factors may help explain the higher recidivism rates among private prison inmates, e.g., their relative youth and their involvement in drug offenses. This study, however, did not report on any programming or reentry services that may have been provided by the state or private prisons. Of the four previous studies conducted in this area, all of which were done in Florida, the three that did find a relationship between private prisons and lower recidivism rates all offered and had high enrollment in academic, vocational, and substance abuse programming, which may have affected the outcomes of those studies.

Implications for Crime Prevention Practitioners: Prevention of recidivism is a crime prevention issue. The finding that inmates released from private prisons in Oklahoma recidivated at a higher rate than their state prison counterparts—despite the greater likelihood of being released on probation—argues for greater attention to reentry planning. Crime prevention practitioners may wish to partner with probation authorities to support their efforts to enhance reentry programs for returning inmates—regardless of the type of detention facility.

**Source:** Spivak, Andrew L. and Susan F. Sharp (2008). "Inmate Recidivism As a Measure of Private Prison Performance." *Crime & Delinquency* Vol. 54 (3) pp.482–508.