

The Rebound Act

THE PROBLEM

The California parole system is designed to rehabilitate people as they leave prison and help them start peaceful, productive lives. But nearly 7 in 10 people on parole are rearrested within two years of their release from prison – most for new crimes and others for technical violations. It's time to transform parole into an institution that more effectively rehabilitates people, keeps our communities safe, and avoids costly reincarceration episodes.

There are roughly 51,000 people on parole in California. We spend hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars a year on parole rehabilitation programs, with little to no effect. Many parolees struggle with substance abuse and homelessness, and only 1 in 5 Californians on parole finds a job in their first year out.

THE CONTEXT

California parole can help formerly incarcerated people get back on their feet and avoid relapsing into crime, but we need to shift the culture inside our parole departments. To do so, we should take the best lessons from a landmark reform of California probation, and apply them to parole.

In 2009, California passed a law called SB 678 which began rewarding county probation departments with shared savings if they successfully reduced the number of felon probationers they returned to prison.

- Counties experimented with hiring social workers, partnered with universities, and became very selective about which providers they used for substance abuse treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy, transitional housing, and more.
- In the first two years the return-to-prison rate dropped 30%, and it has stayed down ever since, in all 58 counties in the state.
- The Judicial Council estimates that over the last ten years this reform has saved the state of California over a billion dollars and kept tens of thousands of people out of prison and jail.

THE SOLUTION

An SB 678-style incentive framework for California parole will avert over thousands of people from being reincarcerated over the next decade and save the state tens of millions of dollars.

1. Calculate the baseline return-to-incarceration rate for each of the 21 parole districts in the state
2. If a parole district reduces the return-to-incarceration rate below the baseline in a subsequent year, that parole district is entitled to 45% of the annual savings based on the projected marginal cost of incarceration.
3. Of the savings allocated to successful parole districts, 25% will go to the Department of Rehabilitative Programs (DRP) to spend on evidence-based rehabilitation in that district. The other 75% will go to the Division of Adult Parole Operations (DAPO) to hire new personnel and reduce caseloads in that district.

California's historic probation reform set the bar for the country. Policymakers need to mobilize a bipartisan consensus to deliver a similar reform in our parole districts.