

## THE EFFECTS OF PUNISHMENT ON RECIDIVISM

**Question:** Does punishment of offenders reduce their re-offending?

**Background:** In the mid-1970s, there was a noticeable shift in criminal justice policy in the United States, and less markedly in Canada. Emphasis was directed away from offender rehabilitation programming toward punishment in order to control recidivistic crime. The use of incarceration increased substantially in many jurisdictions and sentences of imprisonment became longer. In addition to the increased use of incarceration, the last 25 years saw an explosion in the use of intermediate sanctions.

Intermediate sanctions represent a range of punishments falling between traditional probation and imprisonment. They include intensive probation supervision, electronic monitoring, boot camps and short periods of incarceration followed by intensive surveillance in the community (“shock incarceration”). Underlying these punitive approaches to criminal behaviour is the belief that criminal justice sanctions will deter offenders from re-offending.

**Method:** A meta-analytic review of the literature on the effects of criminal justice sanctions on recidivism was conducted. Meta-analysis provides a quantitative synthesis of the research literature and this method is widely regarded as superior to the more traditional narrative literature review.

The literature search identified 111 studies that examined the association between various criminal justice punishments and recidivism. Over 442,000 offenders were involved in these studies. The review included studies of imprisonment and intermediate sanctions. Noteworthy in the review were analyses of the findings with different types of offenders (e.g., juveniles, women, minorities).

**Answer:** The overall findings showed that harsher criminal justice sanctions had no deterrent effect on recidivism. On the contrary, punishment produced a slight (3%) increase in recidivism. These findings were consistent across subgroups of offenders (adult/youth, male/female, white/minority).

Compared to community sanctions, imprisonment was associated with an increase in recidivism. Further analysis of the incarceration studies found that longer sentences were associated with higher recidivism rates. Short sentences (less than six months) had no effect on recidivism but sentences of more than two years had an average increase in recidivism of seven per cent.

Intermediate sanctions demonstrated no relationship with recidivism. This category included studies of intensive supervision, fines, boot camps, electronic monitoring, scared straight, drug testing and restitution. Once again, no differential effects were found with respect to age group, gender and race.

#### **Policy Implications:**

1. Criminal justice policies that are based on the belief that “getting tough” on crime will reduce recidivism are without empirical support. Imprisonment and other criminal justice sanctions should be used for purposes other than reducing re-offending (e.g.,

incapacitation of dangerous offenders, denunciation of prohibited behaviour).

2. The lack of suppression effects across different offender groups indicates that applying sanctions selectively to specific groups is without merit. For example, imprisonment and intermediate sanctions were no more effective in reducing recidivism among youthful offenders than with adult offenders.
3. The ineffectiveness of punishment strategies to reduce recidivism further strengthens the need to direct resources to alternative approaches that are supported by evidence. Research based offender rehabilitation programs offer such a viable alternative for reducing recidivism.

**Source:** Smith, P., Goggin, C., & Gendreau, P. (2002). The effects of prison sentences and intermediate sanctions on recidivism: General effects and individual differences. (User Report 2002-01). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada

#### **For further information:**

James Bonta, Ph.D.  
Solicitor General Canada  
340 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0P8  
Tel (613) 991-2831  
Fax (613) 990-8295  
e-mail bontaj@sgc.gc.ca

Also available on Solicitor General Canada's Internet Site @<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>