

Policy 360 - Episode 57 What Works in Prison Reform - Transcript

- K. Brownell: Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Stanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Earlier this year, the Charlotte Observer ran a powerful five-part series that revealed shocking practices inside the state's prison system. The investigation exposed officers running contraband rings, and having sex with inmates. It showed officers beating shackled prisoners, even collaborating with gang members to green light vicious attacks. The report also alleged that state leaders, and I'm quoting here, "have created the very conditions that allow corruption to flourish."
- K. Brownell: As a result of that series, the Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety commissioned a study to look specifically at how prisons in other states operate, and to see whether some best practices could be implemented in North Carolina. The authors of that study are with me today.
- K. Brownell: Joel Rosch is a senior researcher at the Center for Child and Family Policy, here at Duke. He also teaches in the Duke Center for International Development. Previously, Joel worked as lead planner at the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission. He has worked on a number of projects in his career, related to reform in the criminal justice system.
- K. Brownell: Caitlin Saunders recently completed a master's degree in public policy, and was lead researcher on this study. So, welcome, both of you, to Policy 360.
- C. Saunders: Thank you.
- J. Rosch: Thank you.
- K. Brownell: Joel, let me begin with you. The conditions in the North Carolina prisons that prompted this review, that we described just a moment ago, were really pretty dire. But, apparently, they're not common, just to North Carolina. But, if you could kind of summarize what these conditions are, and what sort of a setting people living in, in prisons, that might be helpful for our listeners.
- J. Rosch: Well, in some ways, North Carolina's prisons are not all that different than prisons around the United States. But one of the problems that North Carolina prisons had, and continue to have, is a high vacancy rate among prison officers. And when the staffing at a institution falls below a certain level, you have very dangerous conditions.
- J. Rosch: Now, most prisons in the United States face these kinds of problems. But in North Carolina, salaries for correctional officers have remained relatively stagnant. Because of historical reasons, North Carolina has more prisons than most other states, and many of them are located in places where it's hard to hire people.

- J. Rosch: In areas where you can hire people, like, in the area around Wake County, or the Tri area, in Greensboro, Winston-Salem, or in Charlotte, the job markets there are very tight, and Department of Corrections salaries are not competitive. So, as the staffing levels were challenged, like other states, North Carolina was facing a variety of problems.
- J. Rosch: I want to say that, when I first became involved with this, and started doing research on prisons, North Carolina had about 100 prisons, which is a shockingly high number. Today, we're down to 55, which is many more prisons than most states have, and it's very hard managing those institutions. There's a second point, though, that Caitlin points out in this study, and that is, over the last 20 years, North Carolina has done a number of things that are beneficial for the state, and beneficial for public safety.
- J. Rosch: And those things are, we've gone to structured sentencing, and we've invested in something called the Justice Reinvestment Act. What these two things did, is, it changed the composition of the prison population. There are many fewer misdemeanors, there are many fewer nonviolent criminals in prison. That's good. That's one of the reasons why our state is safer today. However, that has drastically changed the mix of people in the prisons, making the job of running the prisons a lot harder.
- J. Rosch: As you know, as a psychologist, there are peer effects. When you have more people who are violent in an area, if you just double the number of people, the number of problems don't double. They increase logarithmically. So, while the problems and the ... while the population of the prison has changed, the kind of people we hire, the kinds of, the ways they're trained, the way we design the institutions, haven't changed.
- J. Rosch: And I think that lies at the root of the problems that we're faced. The changing nature of the population, and at the same time, real staffing problems.
- K. Brownell: Caitlin, can you describe a little bit about the nature of the information you were hoping to collect, and how you went about collecting it?
- C. Saunders: Sure. So, the assignment from Secretary Hooks, with the Department of Public Safety, here in North Carolina, he'd requested that the Crime Commission write a report on how other states were handling the hiring and screening of employees, the training of employees, how they were staffing their facilities adequately, and then, the strategies they were using to keep drugs and cellphones and other contraband out of prisons.
- C. Saunders: So, we looked at this task, and the first thing we did was, we tried to gather as much existing information as we could. We looked at the existing literature on prison management, specifically, about correctional officer management and training. We also talked to national organizations, and tried to figure out which states were most similar to North Carolina, which states had faced similar

issues, and had recently adapted their practices, and also, which states were known, at the national level, as leaders in these topics.

- C. Saunders: And so, we cast a wide net, contacted a lot of different states, got a good spectrum of states that had similar population sizes, similar numbers of prisons, similar incarceration rates, and also, both at will states, and union states, to try to get a good comparison of salary levels and budgets. And ultimately, we interviewed seven states, to get a sense of, if there was anything consistently across the board that we could point to as best practices in national prison management.
- K. Brownell: Now, were the other states interested in participating?
- C. Saunders: They were. They were interested in sharing their experiences, and they were also interested in getting a copy of the report, because they all felt like what North Carolina was looking into were issues that they were struggling with, as well.
- K. Brownell: So I understand that, during the time of the project itself, there were a number of prison-related crises in the state.
- C. Saunders: Yeah. So, the most notable was that there was an escape attempt at one of the prisons here in North Carolina, Pasquotank Correctional Institution, and during the escape, four inmates actually ended up killing four corrections workers at that prison. It was a really tragic event. Nobody ended up escaping, but it kind of shook the entire state prison system, and has resulted in some rapid changes, and also, increased the urgency of the report that we were working on, during that time.
- K. Brownell: So I'd like to ask you, Caitlin, about what the main findings were from this project, and then, Joel, I'll ask you what you think the implications of this are, and what recommendations can be made?
- C. Saunders: Sure. So, one thing that we confirmed, through interviewing other states, was that while there are some very egregious examples that have occurred recently in North Carolina ... issues of staff misconduct, contraband in prisons, those are things that all states face, that all states were struggling with, and also, staffing levels is currently, seems to be the topic that's on every state's mind. As the economy in the U.S. has improved, and unemployment is low, corrections departments are really struggling to find people to work in the prisons.
- C. Saunders: And so, our finding was that nobody has it completely figured out. There's no one state that seemed to be doing it perfectly, but each state kind of had their, a lot of creative ideas, for ways to get at each of these issues. The thing that I found most surprising is that there's more to the story than salary. A lot of times, the media will focus on increasing salaries and improving technologies as the two main things to improve prison management.

- C. Saunders: But when it comes to salary, when you look at which states have the highest salaries, and how the vacancy rates compare, the states with the highest salaries don't necessarily have the lowest vacancy rates. It's not always a one to one ratio. And so, there's more to the story, which is that, the literature also points out that intrinsic incentives can be a better predictor of turnover, sometimes, than salary.
- C. Saunders: And, while salary ends up the factor that pushes people out the door, if there's a better opportunity, things like the workplace environment and decision-making capability, clear goals and fair policies within the workplace, can keep people there for a longer period of time. And so, salary, combined with professional development opportunities, and staff empowerment, and correctional officer wellness programs, goes a lot farther than just a salary increase across the board as the silver bullet solution.
- K. Brownell: So, Joel, what do you think are some of the ramifications of all this, and what can be recommended to policy makers?
- J. Rosch: Well, there are a couple of different takeaways. First, when I like to look at policy options, there are, I'd divide them in half. Those that cost a lot of money, and those that don't, and I think, as Caitlin pointed out, it would be very difficult to spend the money, to increase salaries, and on the other hand, how we manage our prisons and how people are treated in those plans are ... probably, it's going to have a greater impact on turnover.
- J. Rosch: We mentioned earlier that North Carolina had staffing deficits. One of the responses of that was that the Department of Corrections basically used all of its training resources on new officers, and hasn't conducted any management training for a couple of years. There's no requirement that a manager has to receive training, and until they address that issue, it's going to be very difficult to turn things around. And that's a pretty strong recommendation that comes out of Caitlin's report.
- J. Rosch: So, I think the implications are that the state has to look at, sort of, how we manage people, how we train people. If you're going to adapt new technologies, if you're going to have new problems, you need to think about new organizational structures, and that's going to be a tough issue for them. I think the easiest thing to do is to spend more money, and they certainly should do that. But I think it's pretty important that they look at the management issues.
- J. Rosch: One of the things that Caitlin and I looked at was the legislative requests made by the Division of Prisons. What's interesting is that their legislative requests sort of mirrored many of the problems that we found, and those weren't addressed. So, for instance, they requested more spaces, so they could do management training. They didn't get any of that money. They requested more money for certain kinds of technology, that we found to be effective, and all of those things were zeroed out.

- J. Rosch: So I think that they have a pretty good idea of what they need to, but those kinds of things are harder. They're cultural changes. That's one of the things that's so good in Caitlin's report. She talks about the importance of culture.
- J. Rosch: The other issue that is in the report, that I think was pretty important, is, sort of, how the department presents itself to the public, and to others. Is this a place people are going to want to work? And one of the things Caitlin did was find training documents and recruitment documents done by other states, that sort of make work in a prison look somewhat attractive. We don't do any of that, and I think that we need to improve that. We need to improve the image of the organization.
- J. Rosch: The second, third issue, is, North Carolina does quite a bit for its law enforcement officers, in terms of special training, and also, in terms of our special retirement system. If the state could somehow do more of those kinds of things for correctional officers, I think that would both raise the prestige of the job. We'd make it more attractive, and make it easier to both, hire and retain people. You agree with that, Caitlin, or ...
- C. Saunders: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. So, another finding. In looking at other states, and comparing what North Carolina already does, where North Carolina seemed weak, in comparison to other states, was in the focus on training, particularly management training. The length and content of basic training. Also, the non-monetary retention measures, like, opportunities for staff to provide operational feedback. For example, Pennsylvania had a program, where they had formalized operational feedback committees, and the ideas that staff had were then taken, and there was a partnership with NYU's BetaGov, and they turned staff ideas into randomized controlled trials.
- C. Saunders: And there were systems built into employee management, to create an environment where there was ongoing organizational learning as a group. That added to staff cohesion. And those types of measures were the areas where North Carolina could improve the most.
- K. Brownell: Well, thank you so much for both joining me today. This work is very important, and given that prison reform is on the agenda for many states, I'm sure your work will be carefully considered in that context.
- K. Brownell: I've been talking today with Joel Rosch and Caitlin Saunders. Their report is called, Improving Staffing and Security in North Carolina Prisons. If you go to our website, policy360.org, you'll find the full report, along with links to the outstanding series of articles by the Charlotte Observer, which prompted the report.
- K. Brownell: That's policy360.org. Till next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.