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Survey: Social services for inmates could reduce crime

BY ALISON BATH • ALISONBATH1@GANNETT.COM • JULY 30, 2008

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High rates of poverty, homelessness, mental illness and addiction among Caddo Correctional Center inmates indicate the need for improved social services for those arrested, a recent study shows.

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Offering those services before trial — in some cases in lieu of criminal convictions — would go further in reducing repeat offenses and prison overcrowding than sentencing offenders to lengthy jail terms, the study's backers say.

"There are new innovative models that better protect public safety, better utilize limited tax dollars and strengthen communities by investing in members of those communities. The jail doesn't have to be the center of your community," said Heather H. Hall, Louisiana Justice Coalition director.

Hall and other advocates say the coalition's Caddo Correctional inmate survey, which among other findings shows 73 percent of respondents suffer

from addiction or mental illness, supports the idea of using social workers in the public defender's office to help ease the growing burden on Caddo's criminal justice system.

That idea is supported by local law enforcement officials who have long recognized the connection between criminal behavior and social ills, such as drug and alcohol addiction, or lack of education.

"Certainly, we have a population in our jail that would be better served not in our jail," said Caddo Sheriff Steve Prator. "There are sufferers of mental illness or addiction (who) have done something criminal to land them there but they may not be career criminals. I would be very in favor of any program or effort that would address problems that would keep people out of jail."

The study, which includes some 100 randomly selected pretrial indigent Caddo Correctional inmates and was conducted March 12-May 15, found, among other things:

- 73 percent are addicted to alcohol or other drugs or have been diagnosed with a mental illness or a personality disorder.
- 34 percent have been homeless at least once.
- 70 percent did not finish high school.
- 85 percent have a prior adult criminal conviction.
- 64 percent lived in Bossier or Caddo all of their lives. More than 75 percent have lived in either parish for "most" of their lives

Alan Golden, district public defender for Caddo, said while not surprising, the rates are alarming. Jailing repeat offenders without offering education, addiction or mental health counseling and other services does



Jimmy Collins sits in the common room of the men's cell block recently at Caddo Correctional Center in Shreveport. (Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times)

ABOUT THE REPORT

For its "Slipping through the Cracks" report, the Louisiana Justice Coalition studied 100 randomly selected pretrial, indigent Caddo Correctional Center inmates between March 12 and May 15. The interviews, which occurred within 14 days of a person's arrest, were designed to create a profile of prisoners based on their race, gender, income, age and criminal history. The study also was created to assess the needs of Caddo Correctional's population based on inmates' self-reported learning disabilities, mental illness, addiction and other conditions. The study was part of the Caddo Community Defense Project, a collaboration of the Louisiana Justice Coalition and the public defender's office. The complete report will be available Friday at www.lajusticecoalition.com.



Two inmates rest in their cell at Caddo Correctional in Shreveport. (Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times)

THE FINDINGS

38 percent report being addicted to alcohol or other drugs. 35 percent were diagnosed with a mental illness or personality disorder. 34 percent report being homeless at least once. 64 percent lived in Bossier or Caddo all of their lives. More than 75 percent lived in either parish for "most" of their lives.

little to address the underlying causes of some criminal behavior, he said.

"This is indicative of a failure of a number of important safety nets. When safety nets fail, we end up seeing more and more repeat offenders. They return to jail because their underlying problems have never been resolved."

Case in point: John W. Pilinski Jr. The 34-year-old eighth-grade dropout and drug addict faces a possible life sentence after his 53rd arrest in April. His 16-year criminal record consists mainly of thefts committed to support his drug habit, police say.

"If offenders in need of treatment could be diverted from jail to the appropriate facilities, it would free up more jail space for the violent dangerous offenders," Golden said.

Social workers could be used to evaluate a client's needs and provide services. In turn, concrete, specific treatment plans could be used by public defenders, prosecutors and judges to eliminate or reduce jail time and, accordingly, incarceration costs.

In Caddo, the daily cost of pretrial detention is about \$50 per inmate. Statewide, \$552 million was spent in 2007 for corrections, the study shows.

Social services spending would be significantly less than what is spent on keeping offenders in jail, Golden and others point out.

"Alternatives to incarceration benefit everybody," said Golden, who pointed to reduced recidivism rates among defendants participating in drug court and similar diversionary programs. "It's shown these programs work."

Currently, a coalition grant pays for a social worker in the Caddo public defender's office; another recently was hired to work in the New Orleans public defender's office, Hall said.

Golden said it's a new approach for the office that traditionally is charged with providing for a client's defense — not his/her physical and emotional well being. But by providing for those needs, the office can not only help defendants and possibly their families but benefit also the community as a whole. Less repeat crime means not only reduced justice system costs but also fewer victims, they say.

"If it helps the outcome, then it is within our scope," said Golden, who plans to seek state funds to cover additional funding for social workers for the office's district and juvenile court staffs. "Our job is to leave our clients better off than how we found them."

Both Golden and Hall stress they are not advocating eliminating or reducing jail time for all criminals.

Nor do they see the addition of social workers into the public defender's office as a cure-all. Rather, its one tool in a multiagency approach to address a growing problem, they said.

"The responsible thing is not to be tough on crime — you have to be smart on crime," Hall said.

While Prator sees the need for a tough stance against crime, he agrees other creative solutions are needed.

Routine calls, such as domestic disturbances, deputies and other law enforcement officers handle frequently involve addiction to alcohol or other drugs. Addressing those and other issues plaguing the community would allow deputies to focus their attention on other policing efforts, Prator said.

"We can't afford to just lock people up. We have to work on some solutions to stopping this cycle."

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USAIDIT2 wrote:

This information comes in a nic of time. Me and my business partner was discussing this just last week. We are going public in as letting inmates and there family(ies) know that there are services out there for them and peolpe out here that really care for people not their charge. We will be out and about starting this Ausgust doing intake and accessments.....cml
8/1/2008 11:51:28 PM

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ShreveWatcher wrote:

85 percent have a prior adult criminal conviction; 43 percent have a prior juvenile conviction.
55 percent report having a job at the time of arrest.
70 percent did not finish high school.
Source: www.lajusticecoalition.org

INMATE PROFILE

Most are men; only 14 women were interviewed.
Sixty-five percent of the inmates interviewed are black, 34 percent are white and one is Hispanic.
While inmates interviewed for the study range in age from 18-68, more than half are ages 18-29. The average age is 34.
Of the 100 inmates interviewed, the average income is about \$228.17 a week. The per-capita weekly income in Caddo is \$382.58; nationwide, it's \$485.90, the report shows.
Seventy percent did not complete high school; of the 100 studied, 44 reported attending school through the 10th grade. Roughly 10 percent are illiterate.
Most have children.
More than half report using alcohol or other drugs; 73 percent said they are addicted to drugs or alcohol or have a mental illness.
Thirty-five percent said they previously were diagnosed with a mental illness or personality disorder; 17 inmates report suicide attempts and 22 had been hospitalized for a mental health issue.
Forty want mental health treatment.
Some 21 percent reported being homeless at the time of interview.
Source: www.lajusticecoalition.org

ABOUT THE COALITION

About the coalition
The Louisiana Justice Coalition works to reform the state's indigent defense system through public education and raising community awareness. It focuses on ensuring fundamental fairness, sound fiscal policy and effective policies to ensure positive community welfare for all citizens.
Source: www.lajusticecoalition.org

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Replying to Itolstoy:

*That's a polite, thoughtful post, Shreveviewer.
See, you do not have to insult fellow posters!
Thanks for your courtesy and ehlpful comments!
(pause while awaiting angry castigation for being a "moron" ,
"whining" etc. from ShreveWatcher...)*

Your opinion means much less than you think it does. I see you didn't mind taking a shot at me inspite of your prior posts against that type of behavior. At least you know I'm going to call you a moron... because you have shown that you are. Yep, you are definitely a moron and a whiner... the evidence lies within your own posts. Now please prove me correct by whining otherwise...

7/31/2008 3:28:29 PM

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MIT1995 wrote:

you can only pray ... I really wish we could just quickly execute the dealers of this terrible, terrible plague.

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Itolstoy wrote:

That's a polite, thoughtful post, Shreveviewer.
See, you do not have to insult fellow posters!
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