

July 2004

Sentences for Adult Felons in Washington: Options to Address Prison Overcrowding

—Part II (Recidivism Analyses)—

SUMMARY

The 2003 Washington State Legislature directed the Institute to analyze the effect of sentences for adult felons. The main task is to determine if there are changes to Washington's sentencing structure that could reduce the growth in the prison population, and its associated costs, without endangering public safety.

Our findings are published in three parts. Part I, published in March 2004, reviewed the state sentencing system and examined trends in the growth of the prison population.

In Part II, we use statistical methods to estimate the impact of prison sentences and length of time in prison on recidivism for offenders at risk in the community between 1986 and 2000. The findings are:

- Being sentenced to prison does not reduce recidivism of offenders and may increase it by 5 to 10 percentage points.
- However, once sentenced to prison, spending more time in prison slightly reduces recidivism for most offenders (by 1 to 3 percentage points for each additional six months in prison).
- Only a small percentage of offenders now sentenced to prison are low risk.
- For those in prison, infraction history is a predictor for future re-offending.

The overall conclusion is that the current sentencing policies send higher-risk offenders to prison and keep higher-risk offenders in prison longer.

Still, it may be possible for decision-makers to identify cost-effective means of reducing the projected growth in the prison population without jeopardizing public safety. The impact of any changes on local jails must be considered.

Since this publication is necessarily technical, Part III will summarize the findings from Parts I and II and explore policy options.