

Alternative to Incarceration in the African American Community in Asheville

America has one of the best legal systems in the world, yet it is still failing many of its citizens. Instead of trying to rehabilitate or educate individuals that we label as criminals we sentence them or repay their debt to society in the form of prison time. Then once they have completed their jail sentence we throw them right back in to the society that made them criminals in the first place. With no skills or direction on how to obtain a job we expect them to live a crime and substance free life style.

The United States incarcerates more people than that of any other country in the world. According the U.S. Department of Justice currently in American there are over 2 million citizens locked up in a federal, state and county prison facilities. Because of mandatory sentencing laws this static is up more than 600% since the 1970's. In addition there are another 6 million that are on some form of probation or parole. Every day in the United States 200 new jail cells are constructed. Most prisoners come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most have not completed high school. Many can barely read. Roughly one-third were unemployed before imprisonment. Another third had annual income less than \$5,000.00.

Children of incarcerated parents have increased risk of anxiety, depression, aggression, truancy, attention disorders and poor scholastic performance. If recent incarceration rates

remain unchanged, an estimated 1 of every 15 persons in the United States will serve time in prison during their lifetime. In looking at the crime static's there is an alarming relationship in the incarceration statistics and race.

North Carolina Prison Facts

- * African Americans are 7.8 times more likely to be imprisoned than Caucasians, when convicted of the same crime (2005).

- * African American men are 6% of the population but over 40% of our prison population (2005).

- * An estimated 32% of African American males will enter State or Federal prison during their lifetime, compared to 17% of Hispanic males and 5.9% of Caucasian males (2002)

- * More than 6 in 10 persons in local jails in 2002 were racial minorities (2002). An estimated 40% were black.

- * Black women are 1.7% more likely to be sent to prison compared to 0.3% of white women (2001).

Every year that an inmate spends in prison costs roughly \$22,000 dollars totaling nearly \$32 billion a year in the United States. Most of the bill is funded through taxpayers. It is interesting to think that a person who is sentenced to serve five years in a state correction facility for a \$300.00 dollar theft ends up costing the public more than \$100,000 dollars! The cost of a life term sentence averages \$1.5 million. Unfortunately, much of this cost is

spent entirely on the maintenance of the prison facility and for providing security measures, not on the needs of the prisoner beyond their most basic necessities (e.g., food, minimal clothing, ect.).

States are spending more money on prisons than education. Over the course of the last 20 years the amount of money spent on prisons was increased by 570% while that spent on elementary and secondary education was increased by only 33%. It cost more to send a person to prison for a year than a four year university. So what is the solution to the high cost of incarcerations? The answer might lie in alternative to incarceration. Those who have been convicted of a non serious crime may not deserve to be locked up. However, they must pay pack their debt to society in a more productive way. There are a few programs that are set up in Asheville designed to help those that are convicted but do not warrant jail time. These programs also offer courses to those who are re-entering society from prison.

A very successful program for women is the *Women at Risk* program that is offered through Western Carolinians for Criminal Justice. *Women At Risk*, is an alternative sentencing program that is making a difference in the lives of female offenders in Western North Carolina. Its intensive therapeutic Program, designed specifically for women and the problems they face, helps participants learn to break the cycle of abuse and wrong choices that led to criminal behavior. *Women At Risk* is the only community-based, non-residential offender program for women in North Carolina.

The *Women At Risk* Program provides intensive 16-week group therapy sessions facilitated by two licensed staff therapists. In addition, substance abuse treatment is provided on site. This treatment is crucial because, at intake, 70% of women were diagnosed as drug or alcohol dependent, with close to 30% addicted to crack or powder cocaine. For female offenders, substance abuse is often related to abuse and victimization. Therefore, group therapy sessions focus on how to address the underlying issues of abuse and victimization. Clients also get one-on-one help with job searches, education and affordable housing. Those with a violent offense also participate in an additional 10-week program called "Deciding Against Violence."

Female offenders present complex problems to corrections personnel and social service providers. More than two-thirds of the *Women At Risk* participants were diagnosed as clinically dependent on drugs or alcohol when they began, and more than half were given a dual diagnosis of both mental illness and chemical dependency. More than three-quarters reported domestic violence at some point in their adult relationships, and more than a third reported they had been victims of sexual assault or abuse as adults. The *Women At Risk* Program is designed specifically to help women address mental health needs, cope with past victimization and minimize their abuse of substances.

Completion of the *Women At Risk* Program has made a difference. In 2006 and 2007, the National Institute of Corrections sponsored an in-depth study of the *Women At Risk* Program. Research results, released in February 2007, found that Program graduates were less likely to be arrested again, compared to women who did not graduate. Graduates

were also less likely to be convicted or incarcerated after subsequent arrests. During the two-year study period, 48 percent of those who dropped the Program were re-arrested, compared to 32 percent of Program graduates. Those who dropped were twice as likely to be convicted again, when compared to graduates. Similarly, one-quarter of those who dropped the Program were subsequently incarcerated, compared to less than one-tenth of graduates. This implies significant benefits to children and families, as findings suggest that most graduates moved on to productive, responsible lives. The decreased likelihood of re-entry into the criminal justice system also translates into economic benefits for the State of North Carolina, because incarceration costs more than \$20,000/year for each female offender.

The study examined subsequent criminal behavior for 327 women who exited the *Women At Risk* Program between 2003 and 2006, including 131 graduates and 196 women who dropped the Program. About 36% of participants graduated, and about 64% dropped out. This rate of 36% completion is similar to what is seen in other community-based treatment programs across the country.

Mental illness is a challenge. Close to 40 percent of participants with a diagnosis of anxiety were convicted of a new charge, compared to 24 percent who did not have anxiety. Fifty-three percent of those diagnosed with bi-polar disorder were re-arrested, compared to 40% who were not afflicted.

Substance abuse is a problem. About half of the women who were diagnosed as clinically dependent on drugs or alcohol were re-arrested, close to a third were re-convicted and one-fourth ended up with a prison or jail sentence. Even family member involvement with drugs and alcohol was a factor. Nearly half of the women who reported drug or alcohol abuse by a family member were re-arrested; compared to one-quarter of women who did not report this situation. Women who had experiences with violence and victimization also had difficulty staying out of the criminal justice system.

Participants who experienced domestic violence in an adult relationship were more likely to be rearrested, re-convicted and incarcerated. The situation here is not unique. Across the country, adult domestic violence is a common situation for female offenders, and research has shown it to be related to an increased likelihood of future criminal behavior. Participants who reported themselves victims of sexual assault or abuse were also more likely to later be arrested for criminal offenses.

Overall, research findings show that the *Women At Risk* program is succeeding in decreasing the chances that a female offender will later be re-arrested, re-convicted or incarcerated. This is true even for those who struggle with difficult problems, such as mental illness, substance abuse, domestic.

The *Women at Risk* program remains a successful and cost effective treatment alternative to prison. The average daily state cost of prison incarceration is more than 3 times greater than the average daily cost of *Women at Risk*, even when coupled with Intensive

Probation, the most expensive form of probation supervision. With every successful client at *Women at Risk*, the state is saving precious tax dollars.

Another program that is just getting started is through the Western Carolinians for Criminal Justice is the men at risk program. They are hoping to offer men the same treatment and counseling that they offer in the women's program.

Western Carolinians for Criminal Justice is a great asset to our community in that they embrace the principles of restorative justice. Their programs promote sentencing alternatives that require offenders to take responsibility for their actions, including victim and community restitution; provide access to treatment to deter future criminal behavior; and expand community involvement in the criminal justice system.

No matter what the name of the rehab agency the goal of their programs are all the same. They all aim to keep troubled individuals out of prison and change the behavior that landed them in the court system to begin with. The centers are all made up of caring individuals who all want to see their participants succeed in life. The common link between all of the centers is the mental aspect of recovery. In jail these individuals are locked away in small cells, they show up do their assigned time and then they are right back out on the streets. This patter releases them right back into the environment that landed them in trouble in the first place. However those who are referred into an alternative to incarceration program are met with individual who have in many cases been in the same place at one point in their life. They are given the support system that

our prisons fail to give. They learn not only how to deal with their behavior but how they are the only ones who can change their environment. So when they graduate which ever program they completed they have the tools to break the cycle.

All of the centers in Western North Carolina are facing the same problems. One of the biggest being overcrowding. Of those who are eligible for an alternative to incarceration program only a few will be able to participate. The waiting list is long and therefore many are turned away. It seems that in today's society there is more room in prison for a helpless alcoholic then in a treatment program. It sends the message that those who have an abusive anger problem should be sent into a high stress, survival of the fittest environment rather than in therapy to learn how to deal with the anger they feel.

So why is it that we keep building more prisons instead of inpatient rehab facilities? Many will tell you that it comes down to funding, however the interesting factor is that it cost more to imprison an individual than it does to keep them in a rehab facility.

Cost Per Inmate per day in North Carolina

Close custody \$84.21

Medium custody \$67.43

Minimum custody \$54.02

Average \$65.29

(<http://www.doc.state.nc.us/DOP/cost/cost2001.htm>)

The break down for the cost of an alternative sentencing program comes out to around \$5.58 depending on the program. It seems that we are spending millions to build more

prisons for “criminals” who could be helped for the same price as a McDonald’s value meal.

Last of all how do you expect to change a repeat offender when you neglect to give them the tools that they need to help themselves. Prison serves as a punishment and nothing more. If an individual does not know better how do we expect them alone to break the cycle? Education is the key and that is a lesson that is not taught in our prison system. Depending on the program that you are referring to the average percent that an individual will again be convicted of another crime is almost 30% higher than an individual who successfully completes a rehab program.

It can be seen that not being more supportive of alternative to incarceration programming we are not only doing a disservice to those who are benefiting from the programs, but we are do a disservice to our community as a whole.