

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
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Statement of U.S. Senator Russell D. Feingold
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Corrections and Rehabilitation
Hearing on "Oversight of Federal Assistance for Prisoner Rehabilitation and
Reentry in Our States"
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Mr. Chairman, Congress legislates extensively on the offenses included in the federal criminal code, the methods and resources available for criminal investigations and policing, and the standards to be applied in sentencing. We spend too little time, however, considering our correctional institutions and the consequences of the overall design of the corrections system.

It is important that we be tough on crime, for the sake of all Americans. It is also important that we, as the nation's legislators, be smart about how we handle the crime problem and honestly evaluate which policies do and don't work. The June 8 hearing held by Senators Coburn and Durbin on prison conditions was an important step in the right direction, and today's hearing follows suit.

As the report from the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons reminded us, the design of our corrections system and the conditions of confinement that result have effects that extend far beyond the prison walls. Over the course of any given year, 13.5 million people spend time in America's prisons and jails. Ninety-five percent of those incarcerated return to our communities, bearing the marks--good or bad--of that corrections system.

At today's hearing, we are considering one of the most glaring indications that our current policies need improvement: our nation's recidivism rates. The national recidivism rate is more than 60 percent and our national re-incarceration rate is more than 50 percent. As a nation, we are spending more than \$60 billion annually on corrections, yet generating these woeful results. There are positive examples from around the country--from the private sector, government, and corrections fields--of individuals and programs that are working on this problem, putting together more rehabilitative systems, and generating lower recidivism rates. But on the national scale we are not succeeding, and we in Congress owe it to the American public to do a better job.

The Commission's carefully crafted report, resulting from 15 months of work with top corrections experts, tells us that to address this problem we need to take advantage of the time that individuals spend in prison. The report tells us that some of the best ways we can spend money in the criminal justice system--to ensure that we are investing responsibly, with an eye on

the returns--is to invest in and support educational and vocational programming for inmates. Basically, the report tells us that we should be using the time individuals spend incarcerated to help make them better citizens.

This just makes sense. How can we expect the individuals who have served their sentences to reenter society as productive citizens if all we have done is warehouse them in idle and violent conditions before turning them back to our communities? If we invest up front in inmate programming, we accomplish multiple objectives. First, we decrease the violence within institutions by avoiding the problems that we all know results from idle hands. Second, by decreasing violence, we make it easier for our corrections professionals to do their jobs. Third, we increase the likelihood that those incarcerated individuals won't re-offend upon their release because they leave those institutions with marketable skills. And that helps protect all of us.

Furthermore, we need to integrate the programs offered to inmates while serving their sentences with targeted re-entry programs that inmates can take advantage of when they leave. Far too often, individuals leaving the criminal justice system find the doors of opportunity are systematically closed to them. Reentry programs that increase access to adequate housing, supervision, counseling, or treatment are good policy. When we link corrections programming with reentry programming, we shape a comprehensive corrections system that is actually working toward reducing recidivism--and thereby toward decreasing crime. This how we can make Americans safer. A network of rehabilitative programming is a crucial component in the design of a corrections system--and a criminal justice system--that won't cost taxpayers \$60 billion for a 60 percent recidivism rate.

We must ensure that those who commit crimes are punished. But our corrections system need not be designed in such a way that it routinely regenerates crime. It is in our interest as a society both to provide incarcerated individuals with the rehabilitation tools necessary to emerge from prison without returning to crime and to provide correctional professionals with the resources and support necessary to develop and implement those rehabilitative programs and reentry services.

Mr. Chairman, the issue of rehabilitation, reentry and recidivism deserves our attention, and I appreciate that you and Senator Durbin have worked together to hold this hearing. Thank you.