

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/evil-people-do-evil-things>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Sadly, the saga of Maurice Clemmons, who was released on parole from prison in Arkansas, released on bail in Washington, and is now accused of killing four Seattle-area police officers, is not an uncommon one. But with any luck, this time policymakers will react differently.

We've seen this scenario before: Person is charged with or convicted of a crime; person is released on bail or serves time in prison and gets released on parole; person commits heinous crime; system shuts down and no one gets released on bail or parole until investigation is complete and safeguards are put in place.

More often than not, the new safeguards are harsher sentencing laws (lock em up and throw away the key) or overly protective bail practices (refuse bail for all but the most minor charges).

In either scenario, the system is left with more people behind bars, at a greater expense to the city/county/state, with the public arguably no safer than before; re-offending rates after incarceration are the same as, if not higher than, rates among people who remain in the community on supervision.

So why harbor any hope that this story might have a different ending? First, the state of Washington cannot afford to lock up more people or throw away the key: When [Vera reviewed](#) the fiscal year 2010 budgets of departments of corrections across the country, Washington reported a 10.37 percent reduction from the previous year and was reducing staff and closing facilities as cost-saving efforts. Second, policymakers and the public are not tossing around accusations of being soft on crime but are demanding that those responsible get smart on crime.

So how can Washington and Arkansas get smart on crime? They can learn some lessons from the playbook many states around the country are using to embrace evidence-based practices and implement programs and services shown to reduce the risk of re-offending among those in prison and on community supervision. Vera is working closely with policymakers in Illinois and Alabama, for example, to implement the use of a risk and needs assessment system so that decision makers at every stage of the process can assess the danger someone poses to the community and use that information to decide whether to release people or keep them incarcerated. In New York, Vera is working with parole officials to use risk assessment results and a system of graduated responses to determine when behavior is likely to lead to re-offending.

Some officials in Washington State shrug their shoulders and exclaim, [Evil people do evil things](#). But by using evidence-based practices, we can more confidently predict who might commit new crimes. We can also identify people who are less likely to commit future crimes, supervise them in the community, and still hold them accountable for their actions with better results for everyone.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.