

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/tennessees-new-vision-for-public-safety-has-lessons-for-criminal-justice-reform-nationwide>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As the 2016 legislative session gets underway in states across the nation, it's a hopeful time for those who support criminal justice policy rooted in a holistic vision of public safety that embraces not only efficiency, but also justice, compassion, and a commitment to human dignity.

In Tennessee, Governor Bill Haslam has announced his second-term Public Safety Action Plan and accompanying legislation has been introduced in the General Assembly. The [plan](#) was developed by Gov. Haslam's Public Safety Subcabinet. Chaired by Commissioner Bill Gibbons of the Department of Safety and Homeland Security, the Public Safety Subcabinet is a working group of 11 different state agencies and departments. They work together to coordinate public safety policy and strategy and track progress and results.

The Subcabinet is a remarkable example of interagency coordination and collaboration and its deep scope (it includes the Department of Correction and the Board of Parole, but also the Department of Children's Services and the Department of Health) demonstrates Tennessee's multifaceted approach and commitment to public safety. The plan announced last week is a successor to the action plan for [2012-2015](#) during Gov. Haslam's first term, and continues several of its priorities, most notably trying to reduce the state's recidivism rate, the three-year reincarceration rate for people released from prison with felony convictions, which has hovered around 50 percent since 2010. Considering the fact that Tennessee spends nearly \$1 billion each year on corrections, reducing this recidivism figure, which means that every other person released from prison returns within three years of release, should be and is a high priority of policymakers.

A number of the action steps in the new plans were recommended by the Governors Task Force on Sentencing and Recidivism, a multi-branch bipartisan group of executive agency commissioners, legislators, judges, district attorneys general, sheriffs, a police chief, a district public defender, a mayor, business community representatives, and nonprofit victims services and social services providers. The inclusion of local law enforcement actors and representatives from the nonprofit social services sector and victims advocacy community showed the Haslam administration's interest in producing policy proposals that would have the support of state and local actors who would be responsible for implementing them. Broad stakeholder engagement is [a key component](#) to improving public safety outcomes.

Vera provided [technical assistance](#) to the Task Force in its work examining trends in sentencing and corrections in Tennessee and exploring policy design and innovations undertaken by other states in those areas. The Task Force's [recommendations](#) reflect the breadth of its priorities, and were as various as raising the felony property crime threshold (the monetary value of stolen goods or damaged property which determines whether an offense is classified as a misdemeanor or a felony); implementing swift, certain, and proportionate administrative responses to minor violations of probation and parole supervision; investing in effective programming and treatment services for people in prison and in the community; and centralizing criminal justice research, data collection, and analysis in a criminal justice research council.

Likewise, the new Action Plan is reflective of the range of public safety priorities for the Haslam administration, from addressing the scourge of opiate abuse and domestic violence to reducing recidivism and violent crime. Tennessee has seen a 16.4 percent decrease in crime overall from 2010-2015 and a 5 percent reduction in major violent crimes during the same time. Yet Tennessee's recidivism rate remains high. To many from outside critics of the system to members of law enforcement and others who enforce it, that high rate represents a system failure. How to combat it is the \$64,000 question on the minds of policymakers everywhere.

It is progress in reducing the recidivism rate, ending seemingly intractable cycles of crime and violence that so many people, from stakeholders in the system to ordinary citizens, hope and demand progress in achieving. The [legislation](#) introduced last month in the General Assembly contains several proposals related to repeat offending, including longer sentences for third and subsequent convictions for domestic violence assault; home burglary; and drug sale, distribution, and manufacture.

It also contains alternative policies for dealing with violations of the terms of probation and parole supervision (community supervision), which can include non-payment of fines and fees, failing to report to a probation and parole officer, or alcohol/drug use. While longer sentences and imprisonment [have not proven](#) to be a significant factor in reducing crime or recidivism, better management of community supervision violations may have [a significant influence](#) on returns to prison. More than [40 percent](#) of monthly admissions to Tennessee prisons from July through November 2015 were a result of community supervision violations. Legislation requiring the use of responses other than incarceration for violating community supervision terms could have a significant impact.

Tennessee's high recidivism rate exemplifies the promise and peril inherent in ambitious reform; it shows both how hard it is to successfully manage people on probation and parole and how important it is to do in order to promote public safety and reduce prison populations. Let's hope that reform efforts in Tennessee reflect the importance of effective community supervision in improving public safety and reducing recidivism through an ongoing commitment to evidence-based practices.

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