

# Cutting crime among the mentally ill

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Inmates in Washington State and San Diego County, seen here, have access to programs for the mentally ill that cut repeat offender rates in half.

It seems obvious: providing services for troubled prisoners when they get released will cut the chance they will commit another crime.

Yet only a small percentage of detainees with mental health or substance abuse problems are getting counseling that can reduce recidivism rates by half and save taxpayers money, according to a recent Urban Institute [report](#).

The bottom line: Post-prison counseling is cheaper than incarceration.

"There can be more cost effective alternatives to sending them to prison," said KiDeuk Kim, an Urban Institute researcher and co-author of the report.



### Is this the 'Ocean's Eleven' of cybercrime?

In San Diego, the sheriff's department has been running a program since 2012 that tries to identify and enroll people potentially at risk when they are still in jail. The program offers not only medical and mental health support but also help finding housing and job training.

Of the inmates that complete the program, only 23% are rearrested after six months, said Dr. Alfred Joshua, chief medical officer at the department.

Though not a direct comparison, 48% of prisoners released by the state are charged with another crime.

San Diego pays roughly \$2,600 for each inmate who goes through the program -- compared to \$16,000 a year for jail. The county estimates it has saved over \$2 million since the effort began, Joshua said.

But the program is very limited: Only low-security risk offenders who volunteer are considered. So far, only 359 have completed it since 2012, out of 917 who started it.

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Washington state has been running a similar program in its prisons since 1998. For ex-cons who take part, the recidivism rate is 19%, while it is 42% for prisoners who are otherwise released, according to the Urban Institute report. Currently, 112 people are enrolled in the program, according to the Washington corrections department. Each one saves the state over \$21,000 compared to what it would cost if they committed another crime, according the Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Nationwide, there's a big gap between supply and demand for services to help the more than half million people who get released from state and federal prisons every year.

According to the U.S. Justice Department, only a third of state prisoners who have mental health problems receive any type of treatment -- never mind the kind of comprehensive help offered by San Diego and Washington.

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