

Closing the Revolving Door of Recidivism

On any given day in Fulton County and the four counties around it, with a combined population of 3.5 million, there are 13,800 people incarcerated in county jails. They are being held because they are awaiting trial, serving a sentence on a county charge or waiting to be transferred to prison.

In comparison, in New York's five-city borough — with a population of eight million, more than twice our size — 14,000 are incarcerated.

What we lose in tax dollars and human capital in the cycle of incarceration and recidivism results in terrible human and financial costs. The numbers in Fulton County are staggering. One out of every three persons convicted of a felony will be reconvicted within three years.

It costs the county \$54 dollars a day to feed and house its 2,250 inmates, plus nearly \$10 million spent annually on outsourcing an additional 600 inmates in order to meet the federal mandate to avoid overcrowding. But there are also significant opportunity costs. For every dollar spent on a jail bed, there is one less to spend on public health and other vital services.

Moreover, there are social costs. These include the lost labor-market productivity of inmates, the collateral damage to victims and families and loss of their contributions to civic life.

So why has New York been more successful in decreasing their inmate jail population? Over the past four years, New York's Rikers Island Detention Center has offered mental health and substance abuse counseling along with educational resources by service providers inside the jail. The inmates also had access to service providers after their release. In the process, Rikers Island was able to reduce its jail population by nearly 50 percent over a period of just four years.

In response to our circumstances, I have initiated the Fulton County *Task Force on Reentry* to reduce adult recidivism. The group began meeting in April and was formally recognized by the entire Fulton County Board of Commissioners in June. It includes leaders from criminal justice agencies, educational institutions and social services.

The Task Force's goals are to identify collaborative strategies to reduce recidivism so that fewer crimes are committed by ex-offenders and the community is made safer. The Board of Commissioners of Fulton County believes that by incorporating successful reentry models, we can improve outcomes for ex-offenders and increase public safety in our region.

These strategies work.

In order to deter people from entering the criminal justice system and preventing those who do enter from reoffending, local, state and federal agencies must address the issue collectively. Moreover, the community's resources and intellectual capital must weigh in on this pressing societal need.

None of us is immune from crime — including me. Two weeks ago my home was burglarized in the middle of the day.

For victims, the sense of violation can lead to outrage. But the reality is that unless we find ways to provide services and direction and prevent people from reoffending, the cell door will continue to be a revolving door.