

Todd Clear: Including Violent Crimes in Plans for Prison Reform

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University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

“The question is not whether to release a person from prison, rather, ‘When?’”

Todd Clear, Ph.D.
University Professor of
Criminal Justice at
Rutgers University



At a program hosted by the Smart Decarceration Initiative, Todd Clear, University Professor of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, outlined why including people charged with violent offenses in prison reform is unequivocally necessary.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Todd Clear, University Professor of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, is an advocate of effectiveness-based policy, with research interests in community justice, correctional classification, intermediate sanctions, and sentencing policy. Clear has served as president of the American Society of Criminology, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, and the Association of Doctoral Programs in Criminology and Criminal Justice. He earned his master's and doctoral degrees at the School of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Albany.

“We are self-damagingly wrong about violence.”

This bold claim comes at the end of society's “great prison experiment,” which was built on the idea that more prisons means less crime. Clear explained that, in fact, states with the biggest drop in prison population have seen the biggest drop in crime rates. He challenged the generalized use of the term “violent,” which actually encompasses a wide range of behaviors that aren't as serious as the term suggests.

He further invalidated a commonly held misconception that releasing people with violent offenses increases the public safety risk. Examples from California and New Jersey show that many violent cases are actually *low-risk* and that re-arrest patterns are not much different than other cases. In addition, Clear explained that moderate reductions in time served are not related to risk of recidivism.

“Illinois could lead the nation in reducing prison populations.”

With just three practical policy changes, Clear described how Illinois, or any state, could lead the way in including violent crimes in prison reform and reducing overall mass incarceration. Those changes include:

- Eliminating prison sentencing for drug and public order crime
- Returning to 1988 length-of-stay laws for felonies
- Diverting all technical probation and parole violators from prison.