

Editorial: Survey proves need to re-examine sentencing

Nothing excuses crime, but an analysis released by the Louisiana Justice Coalition makes it easier to understand why it happens.

Better yet, it points to ways to prevent future crimes.

The organization interviewed 100 pre-trial inmates at Caddo Correctional Center and found trends that probably aren't surprising to anyone familiar with the criminal justice system:

38 percent said they were addicted to drugs or alcohol

35 percent had a diagnosed mental illness

70 percent did not finish high school

55 percent were employed at the time of the arrest

85 percent have a prior adult conviction.

The survey does provide numbers confirming our position that something needs to change in the way we punish and rehabilitate criminals. Then we might see a decrease in recidivism rates.

It only makes logical sense that an uneducated person with an addiction could eventually turn to crime. And if they do not change while in custody, they will return to what they already know.

So instead of just locking people up repeatedly, we need to get creative in sentencing: perhaps including rehab, job training or mental health counseling in addition to jail time.

We're encouraged that corrections officials seem to agree the new standard should be "smart on crime" as they fulfill their mission to "enhance public safety through the safe and secure incarceration of offenders ... and proven rehabilitative strategies."

Several options are already being discussed.

Louisiana Justice Coalition, which advocates for a better public defense system, suggests placing more social workers in the public defender's office. The theory is they could work with those arrested to evaluate the social needs of the suspects and help lawyers and judges come up with a sentence that would punish the crime and prevent another.

Caddo Sheriff Steve Prator is working on plans for a re-entry center at Caddo Correctional Center that would include substance abuse counseling and a work release program for inmates.

State Rep. Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, received approval for a statewide study of sentencing provisions.

All of these options are helping create a system that might work to actually solve the problem of crime instead of just setting it aside and hoping it goes away.

And with \$552 million spent on corrections last year, it also makes fiscal sense to look at alternatives.

Prator said it best: "We can't afford to just lock people up. We have to work on some solutions to stopping this cycle."