

A 'Meth Prison' Movement

Newsweek, 4/24/06

As the methamphetamine epidemic continues to ravage the country, some states are responding with a new innovation: "meth prisons" dedicated exclusively to inmates addicted to the drug. The Montana Department of Corrections just approved construction of two of them -- an 80-inmate unit for men and a 40-inmate unit for women. Illinois, which already had a two-year-old drug prison that handles a variety of addictions, plans to open two meth-specific facilities by July 2007; each one will house 200 male inmates.

By placing meth users in intensive treatment programs and isolating them from convicts who can teach them new criminal skills (like check forging), state officials hope to reduce high recidivism rates among addicts. "Just being in jail isn't going to fix this," says Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer. "Jail doesn't get the demons out."

The meth prisons are aimed not just at drug dealers and manufacturers, but also at those who commit crimes, like robberies, to feed their addictions. While the Illinois program will be voluntary for offenders, the law in Montana will authorize judges to order prisoners to serve time in a meth facility. Treatment will include group counseling, individual therapy and seminars on work, family and life skills. In Montana, family visits won't be permitted until inmates are deemed ready. Upon their release, case managers will monitor parolees to ensure that they continue to attend treatment programs.

Similar approaches appear to be working elsewhere. In Indiana, where corrections officials have set up meth units within four regular prisons in the past year, 66 members of the first graduating class were released about six months ago; so far, none have committed another offense. In Illinois, recidivism among inmates released from the drug prison is 50 percent less than among a comparable group in the regular prisons. "It will take a few years for us to know whether this (new) strategy works," says Jeremy Travis of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who praises the states' efforts. Communities, he says, desperately need "new response to a profoundly serious problem that threatens public safety and public health."