

Criminal Justice

Revolving Cell Door

Hard time is supposed to be hard. But a new study says harsher prison conditions also make criminals measurably more likely to offend again. The study tracks nearly a thousand people released from federal prisons in 1987. Those whose federal inmate classification scores just barely landed them in low-security (rather than the cushier minimum-security) lockup ended up back in the pokey nearly twice as often as inmates whose scores were slightly lower. The paper's findings cast grave doubt on the value of at least one model of deterrence, which holds that a few years of grim prison conditions will spook criminals back onto the straight and narrow. Whatever the deterrent effects of harsh prison conditions, the authors conclude, they may often be outweighed by the increased criminal propensities of the prisoners subject to them.

—*"Does Prison Harden Inmates?" M. Keith Chen (Yale University) and Jesse M. Shapiro (University of Chicago)*