

Can dual treatment prevent a life of crime?

January 19, 2012 3:00 AM Fran Simon

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In Louisiana, the rate of recidivism — marked by an offender's return to prison — is more than 50 percent. But Tulane criminologist Peter Scharf believes there is hope. He will be evaluating the Louisiana state plan to reduce recidivism by treating ex-convicts for both substance abuse and mental illness.



Criminologist Peter Scharf will be evaluating the state's plan to treat ex-convicts for both substance abuse and mental illness. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

As many as 40 percent of those who are imprisoned have some sort of mental illness, says [Scharf](#), a research professor in the Department of Global Health Systems and Development. Depression is a common mental illness among the incarcerated.

“Typically, guys are medicated while they're in jail, but they lose their prescriptions when they're out on the streets. Then they self-medicate with marijuana or stronger drugs,” Scharf says. “I believe it's more effective to treat mental illness as part of a continuum of programs for correctional re-entry into society after prison.”

Scharf says \$65 billion is spent on confinement of prisoners in the United States ? an “unacceptable burden” on society that could be reduced if ex-convicts are in appropriate treatment programs.

He is developing rigorous measurement tools to evaluate intervention programs that will take place in the capitol district surrounding Baton Rouge, La. Scharf intends to set parameters, such as which violations constitute recidivism and how many years without arrest constitute success. Funding for the research will be provided to the Louisiana Department of Corrections and Tulane University using funds from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Scharf would like to ascertain data about the relationship between violence, specifically murder, and co-existing conditions of substance abuse and mental illness.

“We need to use science to plan the best treatment, and the [Tulane School of Public Health \[and Tropical Medicine\]](#) has the tools to plan successful release of prisoners,” Scharf says.