



Tuesday, April 4, 2006



## US study: Drug treatment much cheaper alternative to prison time

By LOUISE CHU Associated Press Writer

(AP) - SAN FRANCISCO-California saves more than twice the amount of money that it spends on nonviolent drug offenders who are sentenced to treatment rather than prison, according to a new study.

The report by UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior found that taxpayers saved nearly \$2.50 (â, -2.05) for every dollar invested in drug treatment in the first 30 months since implementation of a 2000 law allowing drug treatment as an alternative to imprisonment. Savings further increased if offenders actually completed their programs, with taxpayers saving nearly \$4 (â, -3.27) per dollar spent, according to the study that was be released Wednesday.

The total savings in the first 30 months was more than \$173 million (â, -141.61 million), said researchers, who factored in money saved from such areas as housing inmates, probation, parole, re-arrests and future court fees.

Proposition 36 - the so-called Substance Abuse and Crime Prevention Act - allocates \$120 million (â, -98.22 million) per year for nonviolent first- and second-time offenders to enroll in drug treatment programs.

Treatment advocates said the cost savings reported in the study would only increase over time, as the number of repeat offenders decreased after successful treatment.

"Even in that least efficient year, taxpayers realized enormous cost savings," said Daniel Abrahamson of the Drug Policy Alliance who co-authored Proposition 36. Advocates have projected the program would eventually save an average of \$250 million (â, -204.63 million) per year.

The study also recommended improvements to the program to boost effectiveness, such as greater collaboration between state and local governments, better monitoring of offenders after treatment and improved screening methods to determine who is eligible.

"The cost savings are dramatic, but with increased system accountability measures and improved offender management ... they could rise even higher," study co-author M. Douglas Anglin said.

John Lovell, legislative counsel for the California Narcotics Officers Association, which opposed Proposition 36, said the recommendations support their view that the program currently lacks that accountability.

The majority of offenders eligible for treatment do not successfully complete it, making them more likely to re-offend, Lovell said, pointing to a 2004 UCLA study that showed only 24 percent of offenders ordered to get treatment actually completed it.

"We agree that if you have successful treatment, you will achieve cost savings. But the key there is successful treatment," he said.

With funding for Proposition 36 set to expire this year, several lawmakers have proposed legislation to renew the funding while applying certain restrictions, such as adding a short-term jail option for certain offenders.

Lovell said the jail option, as well as follow-up drug testing and probation, is what is needed to make the program fully effective.

Dave Fratello, another co-author of Proposition 36, said such restrictions would fundamentally change the program.

"There's really no rationale for making the changes they want, except to give in to law enforcement interests who always wanted this to be a punishment model rather than a treatment model," he said.

2006-04-05T02:28:58Z

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