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**ONE SMART INVESTMENT FOR REDUCING CRIME
ADDING MORE PAROLE/PROBATION OFFICERS CAN MAKE A BIG
DIFFERENCE**

FORGET MORE COPS.

If the city would only hire more probation and parole officers, we'd make far more progress stemming the rising tide of homicide and other crimes. That's what a handful of experts testifying this week at a City Council subcommittee hearing believe, and their evidence is compelling enough to convince us.

Consider: People who commit much of our crime are already in the system, either by virtue of being repeat offenders or by being probation violators.

In 2006, of the 576 shootings that led to an arrest, 23 percent of those taken into custody were on probation. Twenty-two percent of those arrested for homicide were on probation. And of the 406 homicides, 14 percent of the victims were on probation.

In Philadelphia, 52,000 people are on parole or probation. Yet the city has only 287 probation and parole officers - each one responsible for a staggering 150-180 cases. These officers at the tail end of the criminal-justice system are expected to be social workers, housing specialists, employment agencies and drug counselors all rolled into one.

The Adult Probation and Parole Department could use at least 100 more officers authorized by City Council, although the agency could easily handle twice that many.

With these burdensome caseloads and a payscale that starts at \$35,000 and maxes out at about \$45,000, the turnover rate is high: 40 percent every three to five years, says Bob Zimmerman, president of AFSCME Local 810, which represents the officers.

But the problem is more than burdensome caseloads. The system needs to better reflect the reality of the cases on which probation officers work. For example, not every probationary problem can be solved between the working hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. More satellite offices would help, too.

The Institute for the Study of Civic Values, a Philadelphia-based think tank, says of \$1.3 billion spent annually to fight crime (police, district attorneys, prisons, courts and personnel benefits), only \$18 million, just over 1 percent, goes to probation.

Consider the payoff of even a minor increase in this investment in offender services and closer individual scrutiny: Reducing the odds of parolees' and those on probation

returning to criminal life.

Not all of the money would be spent on more staffing. For example, the department has been pursuing new ideas. With the University of Pennsylvania, it has started the Strategic Anti-Violence Unit (known as SAV-U). Using Penn data, those at highest risk are identified and provided with more individual attention and treatment.

It's also exploring a kiosk check-in method for low-risk probationers, much like one used in New York, to help reduce caseloads. Rather than take up the time of a probation officer to answer routine questions, a probationer checks in monthly at a kiosk that's like an ATM. It identifies him through a hand scan and a personal identification number. He answers the questions, gets a receipt and is off. Failure to report monthly is similar to failure to report to a probation officer. The caseload ratio in New York? 65 to 1, less than half of Philadelphia's average.

Providing more for the city's Parole Department, which, after all, is at the far end of the enforcement spectrum, might be considered like closing the barn door after the horse has galloped off. But it might be the smartest investment we can make. This part of the criminal-justice system may not be as visible as a uniformed cop or a police cruiser, but it's the part closest to the already identified offenders. With some resources, it's best positioned to get them out of a life of crime.