New Jersey has taken important steps to reduce the number of ex-convicts who end up back in prison for violating their parole. The aim is to reduce the number of inmates crowding state prisons while saving money, and the results are encouraging.

State Parole Board officials said about 85 percent of parolees returning to prison each year committed parole violations, not new crimes. They failed drug tests, for example, or moved without reporting their new addresses, or missed meetings with their parole officers.

In recent years, rather than send offenders back to prison for such violations, the state has adopted a system of “graduated sanctions” that gives parole officers more flexibility. They can tighten up on supervision, impose electronic monitoring or require an offender to enter substance abuse treatment.

The latest innovation is a sort of reverse halfway house — a place where parole violators are held in custody for 15 to 30 days and given a last chance to show they deserve to be back on the street.

These moves have seen proven results. With “graduated sanctions,” the number of technical violators returned to prison dropped an impressive 37 percent from 2001 to 2008. The Residential Assessment Centers, which opened last summer, have kept 810 parolees from returning to prison, saving the state more than $2 million. Officials said the program could save the state $14 million a year.

New Jersey is wise to provide viable alternatives for these “technical” parole violators. Sending them back to prison for minor offenses is not only costly, it discourages them from moving toward crime-free lives.