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Challenges of Prisoner Reentry And Parole in California

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More prisoners are leaving California prisons after completing their sentences than ever before: 124,697 in 1998, up from 50,832 in 1988, and 14,620 in 1978. In the last five years alone, the California parole population quadrupled and is now growing at a faster annual rate than the state's prison population (7.8% vs. 4.8%).

The tremendous growth of California's prison population has given some residents a sense of safety and security, but they seem unaware that more than 90% of those who enter prisons eventually return to the community—most in less than two years. In any given year, about 40% of California's prisoners are released.

Of course, inmates have always been released from prison, and corrections officials have struggled with how to facilitate successful transitions. California's current situation, however, is decidedly different. The sheer number of those released dwarfs anything in state history, the needs of parolees appear more serious, and the corrections system has few rehabilitation programs.

The Changing Nature of California Parole Release and Supervision

Determinate Sentencing Means Automatic Release The nature of parole has changed dramatically in California since 1977, when most inmates served open-ended prison terms and an appointed board had wide discretion to release them from prison or keep them behind bars. Offenders were paroled only if they could show that they were rehabilitated and had ties to the community, such as family or a job. This discretionary system made release from prison a privilege to be earned.

Under California's Determinate Sentencing Law, offenders today receive fixed terms when initially sentenced and are automatically released at the end of their prison term, minus "good-time" credits.. Most offenders are then subject to one-to-three years of parole supervision.

Parolees generally are required to be released to their last county of legal residence before commitment to prison. Sixty percent of all parolees return to Southern California. In 1998, Los Angeles County alone received 30% of all state felons paroled, even though its residents comprise only 12% of the state population. Offenders convicted of certain very serious crimes, such as murder or kidnap for ransom, continue to receive indeterminate sentences and are subject to parole board review, but they comprise less than 10% of the total California prison population.

More Parolees Have Unmet Needs The change from an indeterminate to a determinate sentencing system, coupled with a tougher public stance toward criminals, resulted in tremendous growth of California's prison population. As of June 1999, the California Department of Corrections (CDC) housed 162,064 inmates, the largest prison population in the nation, representing a quadrupling of the prison population since 1980. To accommodate inmate growth, California has engaged in the largest prison building program in the country and CDC's operating budget has grown significantly, from 2% of the state general fund in 1981–1982 to 7.2% in 1999–2000.

The increased funding has supported operating costs rather than programs. Fewer prison programs, combined with a lack of incentives for inmates to participate in them to gain release, means

that fewer California inmates now leaving prison have participated in programs to address work, education, and substance abuse. Although lawmakers have begun to expand in-prison substance-abuse programs, these remain minimal and most inmates do little more than serve time before they are released. According to the CDC, barely half of the state's prisoners have a work assignment or are in a program at any given time, and fewer than a quarter receive education or vocational training while incarcerated. Of the approximately 142,000 inmates released from prison in 1998, a mere 5% completed a reentry program prior to release.

Parole experts believe the reduction in prison programs comes at a time when inmates need more rather than less help. Nearly one in five California inmates has been diagnosed with a psychiatric problem or mental illness. Many have long histories of criminal or gang involvement, and few marketable skills.

Parolee Supervision Replaces Services The number of parole agents has not kept pace with caseload growth, and few resources are available to assist successful reentry. Eighty percent of all parolees are supervised on regular (rather than intensive) caseloads, and generally have fewer than two 15-minute face-to-face contacts with the parole officer each month. Parole supervision costs about $2,200 per parolee per year, compared to $22,000 per prisoner per year. Budget constraints simply do not permit much monitoring, and the CDC lost track of about one-fifth of the 127,000 parolees they were supervising in 1999. Nationally, about 9% of all parolees have absconded supervision.

Most Parolees Return to Prison Not surprisingly, most parolees fail to find gainful employment and integrate successfully into a community, and 70% of the state's paroled felons reoffend within 18 months—the highest recidivism rate in the nation. Parole violators now exceed new commitments from the courts, a major change in California corrections. In 1978, parole violators represented approximately 8% of the total felons admitted to prison. By 1988, this number had increased to 47%, and by 1998, parole violators constituted nearly three-fourths (71%) of all admissions to state prisons.

Responding to Parolee Recidivism

The topic of parole and prisoner reentry is emerging as one of the key issues that California has to grapple with as we enter the 21st century. Governor Gray Davis has called for hiring 100 more parole officers to increase surveillance of high-risk offenders and to locate those who have absconded. He is also trying to increase services to parolees with mental illnesses. The Parole Division is revising its classification system to better identify high-risk parolees.

These initiatives are useful, but more serious nonpartisan analysis and debate are needed. There is a dearth of data on parole. In California, we know the number of parole entrants and exits, but little about the specific needs of parolees or the kinds of services and supervision they receive before or after imprisonment. More importantly, such initiatives fail to consider parole and prisoner reentry within a broader social context. Incarceration affects not only those incarcerated, but also families and significant others—and ultimately community vitality. There is reason to be concerned about the impact that large numbers of parolees will have on health care, welfare and employment, governance, and homelessness.

The Collateral Consequences of Parolee Failures

Debates about increased imprisonment have focused principally on reduction of crime rates. Very little is known about the causal role of imprisonment and release on other social conditions. However, there is relevant research pertaining to the conditions that foster crime.

Community Cohesion and Social Disorganization Research has long documented how the social organization of neighborhoods—particularly poverty, ethnic composition, and residential stability—influences. Researchers also have written about "tipping points," when communities are no longer able to exert stable influences over the residents' behavior. The structure of a community starts to change, disorder and incivilities increase, outmigration follows, and crime and violence increase.

The growing influence of prison gangs on inner-city communities is also of concern. Most California prisons are violent and dangerous, and new inmates search for protection and connections. Many find both in gangs. Inevitably, these gang loyalties are exported to the neighborhoods, and the revolving door of prison strengthens street-gang ties. As more youth are incarcerated earlier in their criminal careers, a larger number will come out of prison with intensely hostile attitudes, and will exert increasingly strong negative influences on neighborhoods.

Work and Economic Well-Being The majority of inmates leave prison without savings, without immediate entitlement to unemployment benefits, and with poor prospects for employment. Survey data indicate that one year after being released, as many as 60% of former inmates are not employed.

Unemployment directly influences crime, and also social pathologies closely related to both violence and property crime: drug and alcohol abuse. Those who study life-course trajectories of criminal careers show that losing a job can lead to substance abuse, which in turn is related to child and family violence.

The unemployment of a large number of ex-felons also has broader economic implications. One reason America's unemployment statistics look so good in comparison to those of other industrial democracies is that 1.6 million mainly low-skilled workers—precisely the group unlikely to find work in a high-tech economy—are incarcerated, and are thus not considered part of the labor force.

Democratic Participation and Political Alienation California, like all but three states, disqualifies inmates from voting when they are in prison or on parole. In 1998, an estimated 3.9 million Americans, or one in 50 adults, were either currently or permanently disenfranchised from voting as a result of a felony conviction. Of these, 1.4 million were African American males, representing 13% of all U.S. black men. In California, 8.7% of all African American males were unable to vote in 1998.

Denying large segments of the minority population the right to vote will likely result in greater alienation and disillusionment with the political process, further eroding feelings of engagement and making those who feel disenfranchised less willing to participate in local activities. This is significant, since our most effective crime-fighting tools require community collaboration and active engagement.

Family Stabilization and Childhood Development California has the largest number of female prisoners in the U.S., with nearly 12,000 incarcerated during 1999. Approximately 80% of U.S. female inmates are mothers with, on average, two dependent children,. More than half of incarcerated men are parents of children under 18 years of age.

Studies have shown that children of incarcerated and released parents often suffer confusion, sadness, and social stigma, and that these feelings often result in school-related difficulties, low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, and general emotional dysfunction. If the parents are negative role models, children fail to develop positive attitudes about work and responsibility. Children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to serve time in prison than children whose parents have not been incarcerated.

Physical and Mental Health At the end of 1996, 2.3% of all state and federal prison inmates were known to be infected with HIV, a rate six times higher than that of the general U.S. population. Public health experts believe that the rate is higher now, and HIV will continue to escalate within prisons and eventually make its way to the community as we incarcerate more drug offenders, many of whom engage in intravenous drug use, share needles, or trade sex for drugs.

Inmates with mental illnesses are also being imprisoned at higher rates and ultimately are released. In 1998, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that 16% of jail or prison inmates reported a mental condition or an overnight stay in a mental hospital. Few public mental health services are available in the community, people who need treatment often fail to get it because they fear institutionalization, deny that they are mentally ill, or distrust the mental health system. People with untreated mental ill-

ness may engage in criminal behaviors that eventually result in arrest and conviction.

Housing and Homelessness The latest census counts approximately 230,000 homeless people in America, 49,000 (21%) of whom live in California. Researchers estimate that nearly 20% of all homeless adults have criminal records. While homelessness certainly affects homeless individuals and the rest of their families, transients, panhandlers, and vagrants also increase citizen fear, which may contribute to increased crime and violence. When businesses and law-abiding citizens move from the area, disorder escalates, and serious crime often results.

Concluding Thoughts Parole release and supervision are complicated matters that deserve greater attention from policymakers and the public. More than 125,000 adult parolees are now returned to California communities each year. Most have been released to parole systems that provide few services and impose conditions that almost guarantee failure. Monitoring systems are getting better, and public tolerance for failure on parole is decreasing. The result is that many more parolees are being returned to prison, putting pressure on states to build more facilities—which, in turn, limits money available for rehabilitation programs that might have helped parolees while they were in the community. This cycle means that parolees will continue to receive fewer services to help them address their underlying problems, ensuring that recidivism rates remain high and public support for parole remains low.

This situation represents a formidable challenge to those concerned with crime and punishment. The public will not support community-based punishments until they have been shown to work, yet they won't have an opportunity to work without sufficient funding and research on ways to increase their effectiveness. California spending on parole services was cut 44% in 1997, resulting in a near-doubling of parole caseloads. When caseloads increase services decline, and even parolees who are motivated to change have little opportunity to do so. Job training programs are cut, and parolees often remain at the end of long waiting lists for community-based drug and alcohol treatment. This is particularly unfortunate because most inmates have a strong desire to succeed when they are first released. If we fail to take advantage of this motivation, we miss one of the few potential points to successfully intervene in offenders' lives.

By 2005, the state is predicted to have a record 175,000 felons on parole—double the 1990 population. If current parole revocation trends continue, three out of four people entering California prisons each year will have failed the terms of their parole. Given the increasing human and financial costs associated with prison—and the potential threats parolees pose to victims, families, children, and communities as a consequence of incarceration—investing in effective reentry programs may well be one of the best investments we make.

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