

Staffing woes, big caseloads hurt system

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By 2002, nearly one in three prison admissions across the country were the result of probation or parole rules violations, according to U.S. Justice Department figures.

In Virginia, roughly one in six prison admissions in 2002 were so-called "technical violators."

In California, which has one of the largest prison systems in the country, it is a huge problem.

California accounts for 42 percent of all technical parole violators returned to state prisons in the United States, according to a study by the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center.

Daniel F. Wilhelm, director of the state sentencing and corrections program for the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City, said California imprisons as many as 75,000 technical violators a year for an average stay of four months at a total cost of \$1 billion a year.

Of a prison population of about 167,000, about half will be released within a year, said criminologist Joan Petersilia of the University of California, Irvine.

Petersilia, who is conducting a study of the issue, said she believes the number of technical violators entering the system is only a fraction of 75,000.

Nevertheless, she said that "you've got about 40 percent of the [prison] population churning. They go in for three or four months and then they go back out . . . it's the technical violators."

A policy question

Wilhelm said such numbers raise a serious policy question.

"If you had a billion dollars to spend, is incarcerating a group of people - who have failed to abide by the terms of the supervision - for an average of about four months, is that the best way to spend a billion dollars to get public safety?"

"More and more states are coming to the conclusion that that's not a good bargain," Wilhelm said. "Nor is it an especially effective way to guarantee public safety."

Dr. Michael Jacobson, a former New York City probation and correction commissioner, said technical violators have become a big issue in many states.

"Essentially, every incentive that exists now in most states - every political incentive, every fiscal incentive, every organizational incentive - is for these [probation and parole] officers to technically violate as many of these people as possible and send them back" to prison.

"It's just not fair to ask these probation and parole officers to supervise so many people," said Jacobson, who also is a professor of criminology at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

At the end of 2002, over 4.7 million adult men and women were under federal, state or local probation or parole - a record high, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

Caseloads dropping

Drew Molloy, president of the American Probation and Parole Association and a former probation and parole officer in Virginia, said there are signs caseloads are dropping, but they need to drop even more.

Budget cutting in many states has hit community corrections hard, he said, making it impossible to fill needed probation and parole officer positions, leaving existing officers with caseloads too large to properly manage.

Molloy said that because of the large caseloads, "instead of the officers spending a great deal of time trying to do something with those offenders, they're going to take them off the streets.

"And that's an unfortunate thing because if you had a manageable caseload, some of those technical violators could be helped."

Jacobson said officers fear there is someone on their caseload who might commit a horrific crime.

In a perfect world, when someone is caught breaking rules, there should be alternatives to prison, such as drug-treatment programs, electronic monitoring or day reporting centers.

"But the fact is, most agencies don't have anything like that - certainly not in any significant numbers," he said.

Many parole and probation officers will say, "'if I had other options, I'd use other options. But in this political climate, don't ask me to ignore violative behavior. I'm not going to do it. I don't want to be on the front page.'"

"So people are just flowing into prison," Jacobson said. "It's insane."

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