

U.S. Prison Study Faults System and the Public

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CHICAGO, June 7 -- Not only are America's prisons and jails largely failing the 13.5 million adults who pass through them each year, but the American public is also failing the prisons and jails, a bipartisan study group concluded in a report released Wednesday.

Politicians have passed laws dramatically increasing the inmate population to 2.2 million on a given day without understanding life behind bars or funding programs likely to help prisoners return home and not commit more crimes, said the private Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons.

Even the data that would help specialists make sense of U.S. crime and punishment are lacking, said the members, who devoted 15 months of research and public hearings to the project.

"We should be astonished by the size of the prisoner population, troubled by the disproportionate incarceration of African-Americans and Latinos, and saddened by the waste of human potential," the panel said in a report to be presented to Congress on Thursday.

"Confronting Confinement," sponsored by the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York think tank, adds an eminent voice to the view that the recent boom in imprisonment has not always made Americans safer, even as violent crime has dropped.

The report draws on hundreds of experts, including corrections officers, inmates, psychiatrists, policymakers, scholars and religious leaders. It paints a dispiriting portrait of incarceration in the United States, and contends that a high price is paid for poor policy and implementation, in dollars and anguish alike. Each year, the United States spends an estimated \$60 billion on corrections.

The report gives credit to the best corrections professionals, but finds too much violence and too little medical and mental health care, as well as a "desperate need for the kinds of productive activities that discourage violence and make rehabilitation possible."

In a conference call with reporters, the commission's executive director, Alex Busansky, said that "the central question is how we can do things differently."

The members include former judge John J. Gibbons, former FBI director William S. Sessions and National Urban League President Marc H. Morial. Others are prison rights advocate Stephen B. Bright, Sheriff Mark H. Luttrell of Shelby County, Tenn., and prisons chief Timothy Ryan of Orange County, Fla. Ryan said he has evolved after once believing it best to lock up prisoners and toss the key.

The commission's principal conviction is that prison life is relevant far beyond the fences and walls of the nearly 5,000 adult places of incarceration in the United States. Violence, overcrowding and poor services -- from medical care to literacy programs -- ripple outward when an inmate heads home, as 95 percent do.

"What happens inside jails and prisons does not stay inside jails and prisons," the commission concluded. When things do not work out, the group found, the effects are felt in higher crime, higher taxes and heightened dismay. Sixty percent of the nation's inmates commit another crime. Even modest improvements in medical care and attention could significantly reduce recidivism, the panel said.

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The commission pointed to studies that suggest that the most accurate indicator of a successful return to society is the inmate's connection to family.

To that end, one commission member said that institutions should lower the cost of telephone calls, expand visiting rooms to accommodate families, and offer counseling to inmates' relatives.

The panel described the high-security segregation of inmates as "counter-productive," often leading to greater prison violence and more serious crimes upon release. It also said that public monitoring of prisons and jails is insufficient.

The commission is asking Congress to develop uniform data-reporting requirements and to extend Medicaid and Medicare, without co-payments, to eligible inmates. Crowding should be reduced, and programs that foster productivity and purpose should be expanded, it said.

"I do not think the American people want to see people mistreated and abused in prison," said Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, a former U.S. attorney general and panel co-chairman, with Gibbons. "I don't think they want to see disease spreading from prison to guards . . . to the community."

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