



The Star-Ledger

State study cites benefits of supervision for ex-convicts

Thursday, January 11, 2007

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Inmates who got out early on parole supervision were 30 percent less likely to get arrested for another crime within two years of their release than those who served their entire sentence, according to a State Parole Board study released yesterday.

The report comes as state Parole Board Chairman John D'Amico Jr. is lobbying Gov. Jon Corzine's office and the state commission examining New Jersey's sentencing laws to require all prisoners to be placed under supervision following their release from prison.

Currently, that only happens for the state's violent criminals sentenced under the state's No Early Release Act and those who apply for parole. On average, about 5,000 inmates "max-out" -- they complete their full sentence and are released without supervision rather than being released early on supervised parole -- while about 9,000 are released under parole supervision.

The state expects to release more than 70,000 prisoners in the next half-decade alone.

"The question is how do we want to deal with the people coming out of prison," said D'Amico, a retired Superior Court judge. "Everyone can benefit from supervision and also from the various programs we have to offer."

Corzine spokesman Anthony Coley said the governor's chief counsel, Kenneth Zimmerman, was reviewing the recommendation as part of his work on a comprehensive re-entry program for prisoners that has been under way for the last year.

Ben Barlyn, executive director of the Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing, said the study's results suggest the state's parole laws should be reformed to require all inmates to be subject to supervision after their release. Barlyn said the commission is considering D'Amico's proposal, although no decision has been made.

"The choice of whether or not to subject a prisoner to parole should not be left to the defendant and that is what's taking place now," Barlyn said. "We want defendants to engage in pro-social behavior."

The Parole Board's study tracked 325 ex-convicts who were released in 2004, according to its executive summary. Most were men with an average age of 34, although those who served the entire sentence were more likely to have been incarcerated for violent crimes and have been in prison before on previous offenses.

It found that 73 percent of the former prisoners released after completing their full sentence had been arrested again by last fall, compared with 51 percent of those on parole. The study also found those who max-out are more likely to be convicted and sent back to prison.

D'Amico said the study looked at the two years following a prisoner's release because that is when an ex-convict is most likely to get rearrested. "After about three years, the recidivism rate does fall off substantially," the chairman said.

This is the second study conducted by the Parole Board's policy and planning unit that found parole supervision was more likely to keep ex-convicts on the straight and narrow. The first study on recidivism released in 2005 found that nearly half of the ex-convicts who completed parole remained free compared with 29 percent of those who did not.

D'Amico commissioned the most recent study to examine the effect of several new initiatives that changed the penalties for violating parole and expanded drug treatment programs.

"We wanted to get a picture as to how well parolees were doing," he said. "It seems that what we are trying to do by way of emphasizing preparation for re-entry is working."

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