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EDITORIAL

Closing the Revolving Door

The United States is paying a heavy price for the mandatory sentencing fad that swept the country 30 years ago. After a tenfold increase in the nation's prison population — and a corrections price tag that exceeds \$60 billion a year — the states have often been forced to choose between building new prisons or new schools. Worse still, the country has created a growing felon caste, now more than 16 million strong, of felons and ex-felons, who are often driven back to prison by policies that make it impossible for them to find jobs, housing or education.

Congress could begin to address this problem by passing the Second Chance Act, which would offer support services for people who are leaving prison. But it would take more than one new law to undo 30 years of damage:

¶ Researchers have shown that inmates who earn college degrees tend to find jobs and stay out of jail once released. Congress needs to revoke laws that bar inmates from receiving Pell grants and that bar some students with drug convictions from getting other support. Following Washington's lead, the states have destroyed prison education programs that had long since proved their worth.

¶ People who leave prison without jobs or places to live are unlikely to stay out of jail. Congress should repeal the lifetime ban on providing temporary welfare benefits to people with felony drug convictions. The federal government should strengthen tax credit and bonding programs that encourage employers to hire people with criminal records. States need to stop barring ex-offenders from jobs because of unrelated crimes — or arrests in the distant past that never led to convictions.

¶ Congress should deny a request from the F.B.I. to begin including juvenile arrests that never led to convictions (and offenses like drunkenness or vagrancy) in the millions of rap sheets sent to employers. That would transform single indiscretions into lifetime stigmas.

¶ Curbing recidivism will also require doing a lot more to provide help and medication for the one out of every six inmates who suffer mental illness.

The only real way to reduce the inmate population — and the felon class — is to ensure that imprisonment is a method of last resort. That means abandoning the mandatory sentencing laws that have filled prisons to bursting with nonviolent offenders who are doomed to remain trapped at the very margins of society.

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