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## [Prison crisis and public safety](#)

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IF YOU'RE sleeping peacefully at night under the illusion that our prisons have locked up most of the dangerous criminals in California -- here's one piece of advice:



Don't read the latest report on the pitiful state of our corrections system by the Little Hoover Commission, an independent state oversight agency.

"The California corrections system is in a tailspin that threatens public safety and raises the risk of fiscal disaster," it says.

Instead of increasing public safety, the report states, our prisons are undermining it by releasing thousands of inmates -- 123,000 last year -- whether or not they have been reformed or rehabilitated.

Most haven't.

"Today, thousands of hardened violent criminals are released without regard to the danger they present to an unsuspecting public," states the report (which you can find at [www.lhc.ca.gov/lhc.html](http://www.lhc.ca.gov/lhc.html)). "Offenders are released into California communities with the criminal tendencies and addictions that first led their incarceration. They are ill prepared to do more than commit new crimes and create new victims."

But the answer is not to build more prisons, but to reform our parole system and our sentencing laws, as well as transform the dysfunctional "culture" of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

At the core of the problem is California's "determinate sentencing" system, signed into law 30 years ago by then-Gov. Jerry Brown, who in his new role as state attorney general has the opportunity to confront a problem he helped create.

Included in the report is the first in-depth study of the state's sentencing laws by the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. It found that key sections have been amended at least 80 times to increase criminal penalties. Sentences have also been increased by limiting a judge's discretion to take a range of factors into account when imposing sentences. "The result is a chaotic labyrinth of laws with no cohesive philosophy or strategy," the report states.

Some experts refer to these changes as "drive-by" sentencing laws -- "enacted as knee-jerk responses by lawmakers to horrific, high-profile and frequently isolated crimes."

The report spells out clearly who is responsible for fixing our prison debacle: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and other lawmakers in Sacramento. If they aren't willing to take on the job, they should turn the prison system over to an independent commission -- rather than waiting for the federal courts to take over the system altogether.

This latest call to action should jolt Schwarzenegger and the Legislature to deliver on their promises. If it doesn't, they will have nobody but themselves to blame. Whatever happens now, no one will be able to use the excuse that they weren't aware of the depth of the crisis brewing behind prison walls.

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