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Experts Propose Smart Prison Reform

by

Richard Siegel and Larry Hyde*

Two recent studies bearing on Nevada's use and misuse of prisons deserve to be at the top of Governor Guinn's list for reading and action in this period of budgetary constraints. One is from the state's own Study Committee on Corrections. The other is the just released (June 2) U.S. Department of Justice study on imprisonment and recidivism (the return of former inmates to crime and prison after their release).

The Justice Department pointed to the national dimensions of the crisis in recidivism. A 15 state survey found that two-thirds of those released were caught returning to crime or breaking the terms of their parole within three years, and that this percentage is growing. Various states reduced programs for prisoners since the 1980s, these including drug treatment, vocational education, literacy efforts, and transition from prison to civilian life. Each area of retreat contributed to the high rates of early return to incarceration.

Almost simultaneously the Nevada Committee on Corrections, chaired by Director Jackie Crawford of the Department of Corrections, adopted a Report to the Governor that is wide-ranging and progressive. This ideologically-diverse bipartisan committee focused on the same recidivism problem. It also explored with persuasive statistics Nevada's tendency to house in expensive "hard beds" prisoners who could easily be kept in minimum security camps; the growing problem of male inmates over 60 years of age (over 300 of them) due to recent hardening of sentencing and parole policies; the unresolved critical issues of growing numbers of substance abusers, sex offenders, and the mentally ill in need of treatment; the pattern of children following their parents into prison; and the lack of GED and vocational training needed for post-prison employment.

If this Nevada report is strongly invested in by the Governor and the Legislature, there will be major positive impacts on Nevada's prison revolving door while also saving considerable money long-term by stopping the wasteful building of hard beds for categories of prisoners who do not require such levels of security.

Corrections Director Jackie Crawford spoke passionately about the anti-recidivism aspects of this study at the recent Symposium on Criminal Justice held at the National Judicial College and sponsored by the Sawyer Center for Justice Studies. She deserves strong support for her common sense goal of sending inmates out of prison (there are 4,000 or more exiting each year in Nevada) with the necessary education, training, transitional supervision, and initial cash to begin a new life that will give us all a chance to save tens of millions of dollars when they do not reoffend.

Richard Siegel is a Professor of Political Science at UNR and President of the ACLU of Nevada. Larry Hyde is the former Dean of the National Judicial College.

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Support for "intermediate (non prison) sanctions" for parolees who commit minor or moderate violations alone would be worth the effort that went into this highly professional report. Far too many of the current parolees are being returned to prison because the current system lacks flexibility.

Prisons are a huge expense for the State of Nevada. The costs have taken a steadily increasing share of the state's general fund away from education and social services while wasting human potential. These two reports place the proper emphasis on what the state's executive and legislative branch can do to solve problems. Yet there are other subjects left largely untouched by this study, including needed changes in sentencing statutes in order to moderate recent legislative steps that left Nevada's average prison term well above the national average.

Nevada's criminal sentences have almost always been increased from one legislative session to the next. Sometimes they have to be moderated in response to financial and security considerations that point in the same direction.