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This statement is issued by Southern Illinois University's Public Policy Institute, School of Law and the Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency and Corrections. It reflects recommendations made by experts from throughout the nation, the State of Illinois and the region who participated in a symposium September 22-23, 1998, at Southern Illinois University.



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A Fork in the Road:

Build More
Prisons

~or~

Develop New
Strategies to Deal
With Offenders?

September 22-23, 1998
Southern Illinois University

Presented by the Public
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Develop New Strategies to Deal With Offenders?

The United States has been on an unprecedented prison-building binge since the mid-1970s. Between 1980 and 1997, the number of prisoners in the nation increased 250 percent. The financial costs have been staggering. In many states, spending on corrections has been the fastest growing item in their budget, claiming tax dollars that otherwise might have gone to such important priorities as education, child care subsidies, public health initiatives and efforts to preserve, protect and promote natural resources. In Illinois, the percentage of state operating funds spent on corrections tripled from 1978 to 1998. Since 1978, Illinois has added 24 correctional institutions. We believe there is a need – and the potential – to develop realistic alternatives to building one prison after another in Illinois and throughout the nation without compromising public safety. In fact, we believe the alternatives could enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars by reducing the number of repeat offenders.

We offer the following policy and programmatic proposals for consideration by our elected officials and the public they serve:

- Reserve long-term imprisonment for the most violent and predatory offenders.
- Change current sentencing policies that require non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of minor drug offenses, to serve mandatory minimum prison sentences.
- Seriously consider allowing three-judge panels at the district level – rather than appellate judges – to review departures from federal sentencing guidelines so that judges most directly involved with defendants can determine whether discretion is warranted.
- Make sure that “three strikes and you’re out” and “truth in sentencing” laws are drawn tightly enough to im-

pact the worst of offenders, give judges some discretion to deal with exceptional circumstances and do not result in lengthy, costly imprisonment of “aging out” offenders highly unlikely to pose a danger to society.

- Expand use of probation and other alternative punishments and emphasize restitution and accountability to victims and society. Such programs, for example, would require those committing burglary or other crimes against property to make restitution through regular payments to the victims. They also would include drug treatment and job counseling to assure the offender is capable of making the payments and also of becoming a productive member of society. Community service could be another component of an alternative to imprisonment.
- Develop partnerships among law enforcement and corrections personnel, community groups, church or synagogue congregations, job counseling and placement services, drug treatment providers and other social service agencies at the state and local levels to deal with two groups: those offenders who have been given community-based sanctions as an alternative to imprisonment and those offenders who are leaving our prison system.
- Develop and adequately staff case management systems that can create and monitor individualized approaches to ex-prisoners returning to their communities. Not all ex-prisoners require the same supervision for the protection of public safety. Not all ex-prisoners require the same community-based services as part of their rehabilitation.
- Build on programs and policies that have worked or appear promising. For example, tough and comprehensive evaluations of correctional treatment programs have shown that drug treatment in prisons and jails based on successful community models do reduce recidivism. In this regard, seriously consider providing prisoners with time off for meaningful participation in substance abuse treatment or education programs. In addition, federal and state policymakers should look to drug courts as possible models for reform.
- Assure a continuum of substance abuse treatment, job training and other services for offenders beginning while they are in prison and extending through their reintegration into the community. That means bolstering and expanding programs within prisons. Among other things, correction officials must have the resources to provide drug treatment, job training, anger management and other relevant services as well as working closely with the families of prisoners and the communities to which they will return.
- Explore the possibilities of keeping women offenders and their small children together while the offenders are under correctional supervision – including the establishment of special facilities and/or programs.

- Discourage the privatization of corrections.
- Emphasize early intervention and prevention programs – including full-scale and effective efforts to reduce demand for drugs; identification of emotionally disturbed children at an early age and assistance for them, and development of individual education plans for all at-risk children in our schools.
- Set measurable goals for all new or expanded initiatives. Then, measure the results. Also, continually evaluate existing programs to assure they are effective and not just politically popular.
- Help ex-offenders to secure employment and reintegrate into the community by expanding the availability of procedures for expunging, sealing or annulling records of convictions for misdemeanors and non-violent offenses.
- Experiment with group homes for at-risk children to give juvenile court judges another alternative to having the children return to an unhealthy home environment.
- Require judges at both the federal and state levels to include the estimated cost to the taxpayers of the sentence given the convicted person when announcing a sentence.
- Undertake the examination by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Judiciary Committee of the U. S. House and Senate of the policy of lengthy incarceration and then deportation. Fourteen percent of the U.S. federal prison space is now occupied by prisoners who will be deported.
- Establish commissions at both the state and federal levels to review the prison population to determine if sensible changes can be made that would both save lives and save dollars. Particularly in need of review is the older prison population.

There will be significant costs to many of these initiatives. But there are also costs – in both fiscal and human terms – to building one prison after another and failing to reduce recidivism among offenders who return to our neighborhoods and communities.

To achieve long-term success in protecting the public safety, elected officials may well have to display statesmanship and courage – turning away from easy, slogan-friendly responses to crime and toward approaches that actually will produce better results. We should ask nothing less of them.