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BEHIND BARS

Prisons can be cages or schools

By Joan Petersilia

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CALIFORNIA'S corrections leaders have again embraced rehabilitation, a shift from the 1980s, when prisons backed away from that goal and cut their education, work training and anti-drug abuse programs. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger supports the reforms. "Corrections should correct," he has said repeatedly. Reflecting the state's new priorities, the Youth and Adult Correctional Agency has been renamed the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

California's prison population has swelled to more than 165,000 inmates, and the vast majority of them have serious social, physical and mental health problems. They will spend, on average, five months in jail, 29 months in prison and 19 months on parole — 4.4 years under correctional supervision.

Yet during these months, nearly 20% of California inmates do not participate in any program that addresses the problems that caused their criminal conduct. The vast majority are simply given a work assignment, which counts as a program.

Today, just one-third of prisoners released received vocational or educational training while in prison. Despite the fact that 75% of inmates have alcohol or drug problems, just 25% participated in a substance-abuse program. Even when they do take part, inmates' treatment programs consist mostly of self-help groups rather than the intensive therapy found to be most effective.

It's not that inmates don't wish to join these programs. There are long waiting lists for virtually all education, treatment and work programs. And some are quite promising, among them the Mental Health Continuum for inmates with psychological illnesses, the Transitional Case Management program for inmates with HIV/AIDS and the Prison Industry Authority, which provides job training. But the growth of the prison population has outstripped these and other programs' capacity.

When prisoners are unprepared for reentry into society, they tend to return to criminal behavior. About 70% of all California parolees end up back in prison within 18 months of their release — a failure rate more than twice the national average. Such high recidivism is a huge factor in the cost of running the state's \$7.3-billion correctional system — to say nothing of the harm done to new crime victims.

Recidivism will remain unacceptably high unless we invest more in prison education, job training and substance-abuse programs. But let's not be naive. Rehab programs are not for every inmate, and money shouldn't be wasted on prisoners who lack the motivation to change. But let's also not be foolish. Inmates who wish to live crime-free when they return home should have every opportunity in prison to change.

There is ample evidence that treatment programs can reduce recidivism. Group therapy for drug addicts, substance-abuse programs with follow-up care, intensive psychotherapy for sex offenders, basic and vocational education and prison industries for the general population — each of these programs reduces the recidivism rate of participants by 8% to 15%.

Modest though these reductions are, they pay for themselves by reducing future law-enforcement costs. Prisoners who take vocational education, for example, are 15% less likely to return to crime when released. The cost: about \$2,000 a prisoner per year. Analysts estimate that, on average, this translates down the line into \$12,000 per prisoner in saved criminal-justice costs.

Prison leaders in California are adding and improving work-training programs. In May, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation announced it will work with the National Center for Construction Education and Research, which will hire 70 vocational instructors to train and certify more than 1,800 prisoners a year to work in the building-trades industry.

Inmates who go through comprehensive halfway houses and reentry centers have lower recidivism rates than those released directly to the community. California closed most of its halfway houses, and fewer than 1,000 of the 117,000 prisoners released last year spent any time in one. In Ohio and New Jersey, for instance, all serious prisoners return home through halfway houses. These states' recidivism rates are also much lower than California's.

Prison administrators are partnering with the newly established Center for Evidence-Based Corrections at UC Irvine to review rehabilitation, parole and reentry programs for effectiveness. It's no longer justifiable to say that "nothing works." There is good scientific evidence that prison and parole programs can reduce recidivism. It's not easy. It's not inexpensive. But it's possible.

Politicians who say rehabilitation programs are "soft on crime" are shortsighted. No one is more dangerous than a criminal who has no incentive to straighten himself or herself out while in prison and who returns to society without a plan. As ironic as it sounds, it is in the interest of public safety to support rehabilitation programs. Good rehabilitation and reentry programs translate into going home to stay and living as law-abiding citizens. That benefits all Californians.

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