

Prison Reform-- Bulky, Bold Plan

"The single most important recommendation of this study is that the bulk of the correctional effort, its programs and its resources be moved to the community level."

—Keldgord Report on California Corrections

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By Tim Findley

Despite all the strident demands of radicals and revolutionaries about state prisons, the recently released Keldgord report ordered by Governor Ronald Reagan may yet prove to be the most radical proposal of all.

The report was completed in June after months of investigation by 57 criminologists and penologists headed by Robert Keldgord, a criminologist and member of the Bay Area Social Planning Council.

Contained in its three volumes and 224 recommendations is a proposal that would virtually turn around the present system, or (as the report calls it) "non - sys-

tem," of California corrections.

At the heart of the report is a suggestion that local communities take responsibility for their own criminals and that communities actually be penalized for giving up on an individual enough to send him to prison.

The state, instead of serving as punitive agent for criminal control, would coordinate the efforts of local communities to "treat" their own offenders.

Communities, or counties, would be rewarded with state subsidies when they found alternatives to sending a man to prison, and punished by paying the bulk of the cost for those they did send to prison.

The State Board of Corrections, which the report recommends abolishing altogether, is currently reviewing the report and is expected to make its recommendations on it by the end of the year.

IMPACT

But the report's impact is not aimed at state officials so much as it is at local communities, and their interest in it could be the most significant factor of all.

The report argues that it is cheaper, more productive and ultimately better for society to keep as many offenders as possible out of prison.

California, the report notes, has more felons incarcerated than any other state in the union. This is due in part to the state's crime rate (highest rate of serious crimes in the nation, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports), and in part

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to the fact that California keeps men in prison about 50 per cent longer than comparable states — the median time served by California prison inmates being about 36 months.

Most states, the report notes, have no prison with as many as 1800 inmates, and no other state has more than two such large prisons. California has eight.

In all, the report says California has the huge total of 274,000 offenders under control of its corrections system, including county jails and juvenile centers. Of those, about 53,000 are institutionalized, either in prison or jails.

OTHERS

The rest, fully 80 per cent of convicted criminal offenders in the state, are handled by "field services" — usually either on probation or parole.

Last year, California spent more than \$220 million in corrections programs. But, the report said, approximately 67 per cent of that went to maintaining jails and prisons — only 33 per cent went to programs for the 80 per cent of offenders who are not institutionalized.

"Crudely put," the report said, "it appears that California is wagering too heavily on the wrong horse."

Like most reformers and even prison officials themselves, the report credits prisons with extremely limited success in reforming or rehabilitating criminals.

"It was in the community that the behavioral act occurred which brought the individual into the criminal justice system. It is in the community where behavior will or will not recur, and may constitute the basis for finding the existence of a new offense," the report said.

CONCLUSION

In short, the report concludes that the most effective way of dealing with criminal behavior is to begin in the community where criminal

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acts were committed.

To do this, the report recommends an elaborate plan for making the California "non system" of criminal corrections into an identifiable and significant system.

Although the report does not suggest an order of priorities to the reform, its total impact would likely be on something of the following order:

First, the median time served by California prison inmates would be reduced from 36 months to somewhere around 24 months.

This recommendation, although the report does not specifically say so, slaps at the two most controversial aspects of California corrections — the indeterminate sentence and the state Adult Authority.

ABOLITION

Later discussions on the report are expected to recommend modification or even abolition of both.

Reducing the median time served by inmates, according to the report, would cut the prison population "by at least 8000 men."

With that done, the report contains a key recommendation to take advantage of the reduced number of prisoners and abandon the state's two oldest prisons — San Quentin and Folsom.

The two prisons, the report said, "are immense, yet do not have adequate space for modern programs. They are not secure or safe. Decent living conditions are almost unattainable in them, and they are ugly and depressing . . . So long as they exist, they impede California's correctional efforts and tarnish its image."

The report recommends building no new state prisons, but says that if any are built they be small and close to local communities.

SAVINGS

Money saved in closing those institutions and perhaps selling them to the federal government would be retained and specifically earmarked for corrections.

This would mean that such money could not go to the state general fund, but, like gasoline taxes for highway funds, would be specifically held aside for corrections.

The report takes notice of the state's successful probation subsidy program in which counties are paid a state subsidy for keeping men out of prison and on probation in the area in which they were convicted. This program has significantly reduced the inmate population in state prisons, and, the report said, since its inception in 1966, has saved the state \$126 million in penal funds.

But the report recommends taking the subsidy program a giant step further.

BULK

Counties or local communities would take the bulk of responsibility for criminal offenders under a four-pronged program.

First, the probation program would be maintained, but improved real services, and less institutional attitudes. Most significant, the state would pay 75 per cent of the cost of such programs — a huge leap over the relatively small subsidy currently paid.

Last year, for example, counties spent nearly \$75 million on probation programs, \$13 million of which was in subsidies from the state. But under the proposed setup, the state would have paid nearly \$60 million of the cost.

Next, communities would run local "open" institutions in which the offender resides in a community institution but has virtually daily contacts in work or school or other activities with the local community. The state would pay 60 per cent of the cost.

BENEFIT

Under those two programs, counties would benefit with state funds, but the balance shifts the other way as alternatives lead to incarceration.

In the third aspect of the subsidy program, counties would run short-term

"closed" institutions within the communities in which inmates could serve no more than six months.

Inmates would be confined, but would have a high degree of interaction with the community from volunteer groups or para-professionals who would come in to the institution. The county would pay 60 per cent of the cost of such an institution.

Finally, the county would maintain its current jails and juvenile centers, and would pay 75 per cent of the cost of operating them.

And, under the proposal, if a county finally gave up on an individual and sent him to a state prison, the county would pay 75 per cent of the so-called "career cost" of institutionalizing a felon. The report estimated that it would cost counties \$10,300 for each man or woman it sent to prison.

REVERSE

The recommendations about such a subsidy program in effect reverse the state's entire outlook on corrections — putting the responsibility for rehabilitating an offender on his own community and putting the financial burden on that community for failing to do so.

According to the report, however, the overall effect of the program would not substantially increase the total amount of funds spent on corrections — but rather more specifically delineate who is paying.

It implies that sending a man to prison would be put in a completely new perspective — one of taking a regrettable and costly step.

Although this proposal, like others in the report, could require state legislative action, it could also begin to be implemented from the other direction — from the communities themselves recognizing the failures of prisons and the need for sincere reform. Such community involvement is frequently alluded to in the report as an urgent hope.