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# SENATE FOCUS FORUM

## Corrections/Criminal Justice Program Summary Tickfaw State Park Final



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The Honorable John J. Hainkel  
*President of the Senate*

Prepared and Compiled by Senate Staff

# Corrections/Criminal Justice Program Summary

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During the recently concluded Senate Focus Forum, Louisiana Senators directed their discussions and activities on two major issues involving corrections and criminal justice -(1) alternatives to incarceration and (2) the aging prisoner population.

James Austin, Ph.D., co-director of The Institute on Crime, Justice, and Corrections at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., shared the following statistical information based on data from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics and the state Department of Public Safety and Corrections as a foundation for discussion:

- (1) Nationwide, the total number of adults under corrections (including those on probation or parole) increased 246% during the period from 1980 to 1999.
- (2) Nationwide, the total number of persons going to state prisons increased 61.5% during the period from 1990 to 1998.
- (3) In Louisiana, the total number of persons admitted to prison increased 27.4% during the period from 1994 to 1999.
- (4) Nationwide, the minimum length of incarceration increased 13% but the mean sentence actually decreased 7% during the period from 1990 to 1998.
- (5) Nationwide, the general prison population (i.e. inmates not having a severe medical or mental health problems; not in protective custody or administrative/disciplinary segregation) makes up 85% of persons incarcerated. Of this general population the following percentages represent the three major custody levels:
  - (a) Minimum custody level - 30 to 40%.
  - (b) Medium custody level - 30 to 45%.
  - (c) Maximum custody level - 10 to 15%.
- (6) In 1999, nationwide prison population, state and federal, increased 303% for men and 576% for women over the previous decade.

- (7) During the period from 1990 to 1999, crime rates have been decreasing but the rate of incarceration is on the rise.

In addition, Dr. Austin provided data on the increase in violent crime and drug arrests from the previous decade; criminal histories of state prison inmates by gender in 1996; the percentage of state and federal inmates in 1997 with minor children; the prevalence of infectious diseases among inmates and those passing being released by the correctional system in 1997 (i.e. AIDS, HIV infection, TB disease and infection, Chlamydia infection, and Hepatitis C infection).

Dr. Austin also provided the following information relative to some key prison indicators for 1999:

- (1) Counseling for mental health/substance abuse
  - (a) 16% of inmates have mental health problems  
but only 5% of inmates are in mental health programs
  - (b) 80% of inmates have some drug and/or alcohol history  
but only 14% are in some form of treatment program
  - (c) 19% of inmates have a history of sexual and/or physical abuse
- (2) Work programs
  - (a) 24% of inmates are idle
  - (b) 7% of inmates are in prison industries
  - (c) 5% of inmates are in prison farms/agriculture industries
  - (d) 9% of inmates are in full-time vocational training or education programs
- (3) 23% of inmates are serving 20 years to life sentences
- (4) 6% of inmates are in administrative/disciplinary segregation
- (5) 2% of inmates are in protective custody

Richard L. Stalder, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections provided a general overview of the current condition of corrections in the state and the issues facing the legislature in the next fiscal budget.

Supplementing the national statistics presented by Dr. Austin, Mr. Stalder presented the following Louisiana statistics on incarceration:

- (1) There has been a 70% increase in Louisiana prison population in the last eight years with an approximate associated expense of \$1.2 billion. Current projected growth is 2,000 beds/year.
- (2) Ten percent of our prison population is over age 50; 1,700 persons are over age 55; and 230 persons are over age 65. Twenty-five percent of the over 50 prison population are serving life sentences without benefit of parole.
- (3) The expense per year per inmate is \$11,500. This figure increased to \$22,000 per year for elderly patients, not including the medical care provided by the LSU medical facility. Since biological age accelerates up to ten years over chronological age during incarceration, the increase in medical expense is an important consideration.

Comments and recommendations posed by Dr. Austin focused on the "back end" of the incarceration issue. Dr. Austin said that an inmate's criminal career usually occurs between the ages of 15 and 24. By the time a person is age 25, he or she is moving down in their "criminal career". Prison population is driven by two issues: admissions and how long prisoners stay in the system.

Thirty-seven percent of crimes in Louisiana are drug crimes compared with twenty-one percent nationwide. A drug offender is a good person to target in Louisiana. Drug courts can be utilized as a front end alternative to restrict these persons from coming into prison.

Agreement was fairly uniform that on the "front end" of corrections, early intervention programs for at-risk children, drug courts, and education are key to reducing criminal activities by our young people. These are substantial budget items that should be addressed - either financial support is provided for such programs now or the state pays later when these young people enter the criminal justice system.

General discussion points included the following:

(1) Assessment of every incarcerated inmate to determine which inmates can be released or paroled back into society. An early release of an inmate by just 30-60 days can have substantial budgetary savings with no safety issue at all.

(2) Educational or other training programs for inmates to learn a skill and find employment when released or paroled. The average reading level in the adult prison population nationwide is 5th grade. The state of Texas raised their reading level to 9th grade and this has had an impact on their recidivism rate.

Parish prisons are not offering the same programs as state facilities. We need to move people into the state system who are motivated to get an education. The state should consider a minimum attainment level of education before release from prison - if we release prisoners without any functional skills, then they will probably return back into the system in some manner.

(3) Parole supervision of newly released inmates - assessment of which inmates require more supervision than others if released; better working conditions and compensation for parole officers and prison guards. Parole officers can focus on those inmates assigned to them who need more supervision than others.

The state of Washington forbids people from returning to the prison system due to technical parole violations. Thirty to forty percent of their parolees never come back into the prison system - they are older and their criminal history is minimal. We should consider a policy that parole violators are to be dealt with in some other manner than return to prison - if the violation is not due to behavior for which you can go to prison, then you should not be returned to prison for such behavior.

(4) Suggestion was made to amend the statutory makeup of the parole board to include the warden at the inmate's correctional facility as an ex-officio voting member of the board - each warden has specific knowledge of an individual's performance while incarcerated and that person's potential for success on the outside if released.

(5) Medical parole - inmates other than those incarcerated for first and second degree murder, those on death row, and those with infectious diseases may be eligible for medical parole at the discretion of the parole board. Options also include living facilities for medically incapacitated inmates away from the prison environment requiring less stringent supervision and a decrease in expenses.

(6) Re-evaluation of mandatory sentencing and truth-in-sentencing policies.