

SNG-Reduce prison population-4-4-16

Can we reduce prison population 25 percent? Should we?

By Jim Nowlan

Gov. Bruce Rauner has a goal of reducing Illinois prison numbers by 25 percent in the coming few years. A blue ribbon group he set up is at work to make this a reality. Should we do so?

When I was a back-bench state legislator a half century ago, there were 7,000 inmates in our prisons. Recently the number reached almost 50,000, though that has come back to 46,000; crime is down and the justice system is going lighter on drug crimes, I am told.

During the 1980s, we got tough on crime with Class X felony and truth-in-sentencing laws. These policies took sentencing discretion away from judges and put felons in prison for longer stretches than before.

Illegal drug activity was also up, a profitable alternative for young men from poor neighborhoods who had neither positive role models nor jobs.

Criminologist David Olson at Loyola University in Chicago is a member of Rauner's blue ribbon group.

Olson points out that part of the increased prison population results from convictions for non-violent drug offenses. In addition, 40 percent of all prison inmates are inside the walls for sometimes minor violations of their parole.

Rehabilitation, mental health and education programs in prisons are also woefully inadequate to meet inmate needs, which results in more inmates ending up back in prison than might be the case otherwise.

As a result, we built one new prison a year for a couple of decades and now have 30, and yet the prisons are overcrowded, with a rated capacity of 34,000 to house the 46,000 inmates.

In recent years, however, liberals and conservatives across the country have come together to rethink old throw-away-the-key policies.

There have already been dramatic reductions in juvenile incarceration in Illinois, from 1,600 a few years ago to 400 today. The feeling is that prisons are a bad place to address youngsters' problems. Community-based mental health and counseling services get better results, say the experts.

Many, maybe most, of the adult inmates also have mental health and substance abuse problems, which could also be addressed at the community level. But would they be?

I came up in an era when populations at big state-operated "mental health hospitals" were, as the term went, "deinstitutionalized" (why not simply say we closed the hospitals?)—on the premise that community-based services would be much better for both the mentally ill and their families nearby.

Unfortunately, the local services were never adequately funded, and now many of the mentally ill are in our jails and prisons. My old friend Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart says his largest-in-the-nation jail is the biggest mental health institution in the country.

Reducing inmate numbers in prisons will not, certainly should not, reduce overall costs of efforts to return criminals to society.

And the issues of reducing prison time are not easy, says Olson. Should residential burglaries always result in prison time, as they do now? Ditto for crimes involving a firearm, and for drug sales near schools (even when school is not in session)?

Olson's group has made 14 initial recommendations that go after the low-hanging fruit. For example: expand the use of electronic monitoring based on risk and responsivity, and expand education, drug and mental health counseling in prisons.

I would add to the list the elimination of parole for low-risk, non-violent offenders, so that parole resources can be focused on more intensive counseling for those with mental illness and substance abuse problems.

The elephant in the room is what to do about drug policies, which the blue ribbon group hasn't tackled yet. Olson does sense that many on the commission, which includes law enforcement folks, feel that felony penalties for certain drug crimes should be lowered.

I have always agreed with the late, conservative icon William F. Buckley that drugs should be legalized. Make no mistake, the costs of doing so would be horrendous, in increased addiction and other bad consequences—but lesser, I contend, than what we have wrought.

Our voracious appetites for drugs, which most well-off white folks can get from poor black and brown folks as it is, has resulted in the destabilization of Mexico and several South American nations, and innumerable deaths there and on our streets.

But legalization is not likely to happen in the near future.

For the moment, Olson thinks the Rauner goal of reducing numbers by 25 percent can be achieved. Rauner should be commended for his initiative.