

# Five Years After



## **An analysis of the Michigan Parole Board since 1992**

*Michigan Department  
of Corrections*

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## FIVE YEARS AFTER

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To reinforce public confidence in Michigan's penal system, Gov. John Engler in 1992 ordered an overhaul of the Parole Board and the way in which paroles were granted. The intent of the overhaul was to make Michigan's communities safer by making more criminals serve more time and keeping many more locked up for as long as possible.


This report is intended to summarize the impact of the overhaul five years after it was completed. The outcomes from each change made can be seen in the accompanying charts. The number of crimes prevented by changing to the new process — and the anguish those crimes would have caused — is impossible to determine.

Among the most important differences since the overhaul is a Parole Board that is much less willing to release criminals who complete their minimum sentences — and much less willing to release criminals at all, forcing many to serve their maximum sentences.

The charts and text contained herein will demonstrate several other important points:

- The new parole process is much tougher on criminals, letting fewer felons back into society and clamping down especially hard on violent and assaultive offenders.
- The new parole process scrutinizes more closely offenders who are on parole, making the system more effective and safer for the public.
- The Parole Board has expanded, is more efficient and far more conservative than its predecessor.
- Sanctions for parole violators have teeth — punishment of violators is significantly higher than under the old parole process.
- The new Parole Board is preventing crime — 60 percent of prisoners who served their maximum sentence, and got out in 1994, were arrested within three years in connection with a new felony. The Parole Board would have liked to keep them locked up longer. They got out only because courts and statutes required them to be released.

Debate will always follow the question of whether a penal system should allow paroles. There can be no question, though, of whether the overhaul has made a difference when it comes to making Michigan's communities safer and the government more accountable to its constituents.



Kenneth L. McGinnis  
Director

Michigan Department of Corrections

Two of the most important trends, when comparing the old parole process and the new parole process, are reflected by overall parole approvals and the increasing number of violent felons who are forced to serve their maximum, court-imposed sentence. These charts show, more clearly than any other illustration, the fundamental difference in the two processes and the direction the new Parole Board has taken.

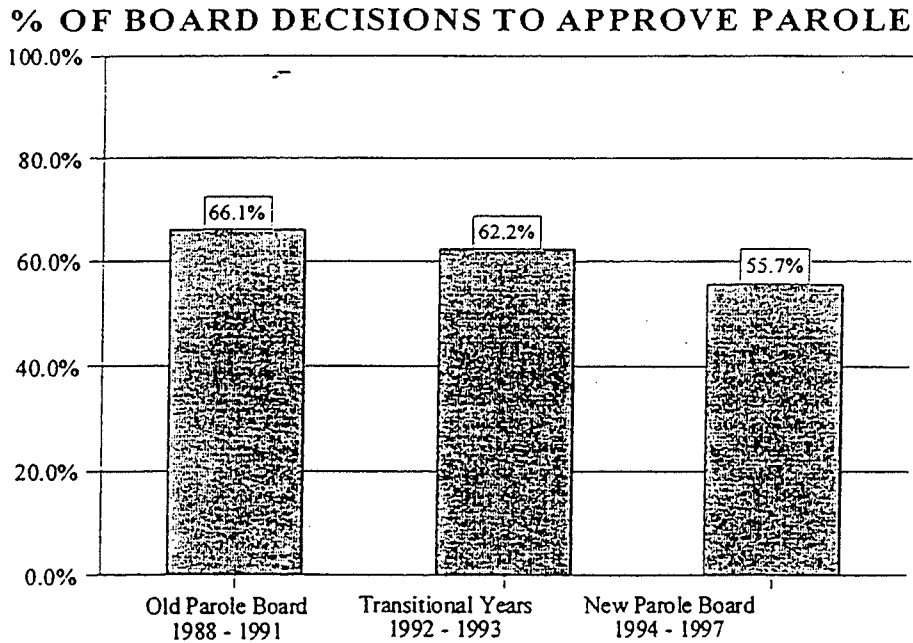


Chart 1

**Chart No. 1** shows a strong decrease in the approval rate for parole candidates. Simply put, this chart means that more prisoners are doing more time behind bars. The payoff, for Michigan communities, is a lower average risk that a crime will be committed by a person on parole. Of those offenders who receive parole after their first hearing, more than 70 percent are serving for non-assaultive crimes.

This is perhaps at the heart of public debate over parole — whether the system was strict enough in its examination of prisoners. The downward trend demonstrates that the new Parole Board is responding successfully to public demand for a tighter, less-lenient system.

## PRISONERS WHO HAVE SERVED LONGER THAN COURT IMPOSED SENTENCE

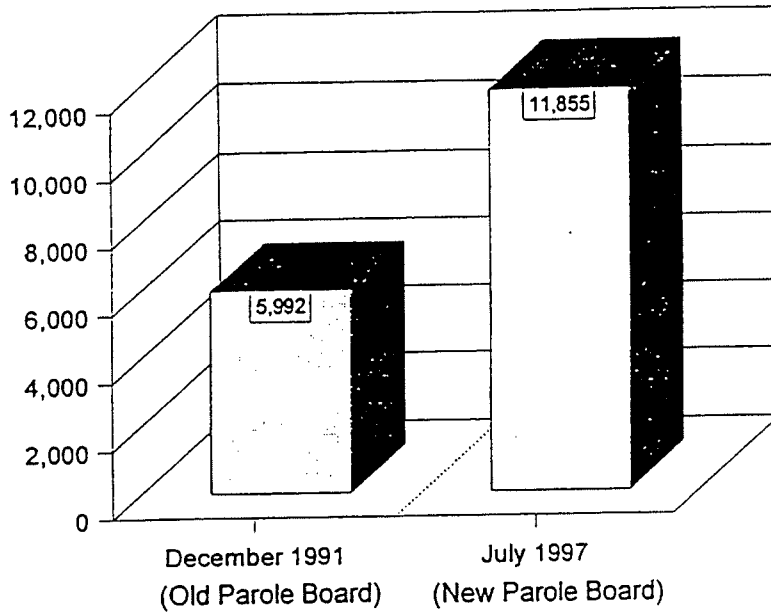


Chart 2

**Chart No. 2** shows more prisoners serving for longer periods of time than the minimum sentence imposed by the court. This chart is tangible evidence that the new Parole Board is not as willing as the old board was to grant parole to prisoners on their first eligibility date — sending a message that public safety, and not a guaranteed release, is uppermost in the minds of Parole Board members.

Expressed another way: only 16.5 percent of prisoners serving in 1991 were serving beyond their court-imposed minimum date. By July, 1997, more than 28 percent were serving past the minimum sentence.

The new board is also making more sex offenders serve longer past the minimum sentence imposed by the court. Since the overhaul, the sex offender population has grown rapidly — reaching record levels, both in terms of raw numbers and as a percentage of the population, almost every year.

All paroles are not the same. Example: An offender sentenced to serve five to 15 years might serve one day after the minimum date before parole, or get paroled 14 years and 363 days later — one day before the maximum date. While both cases show up as paroles in figures, the difference to the public is significant.

### PERCENT OF COURT IMPOSED SENTENCE SERVED FOR VIOLENT CRIMES

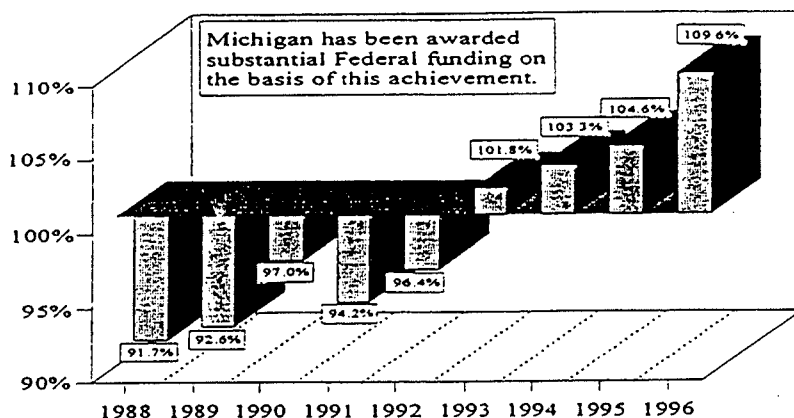
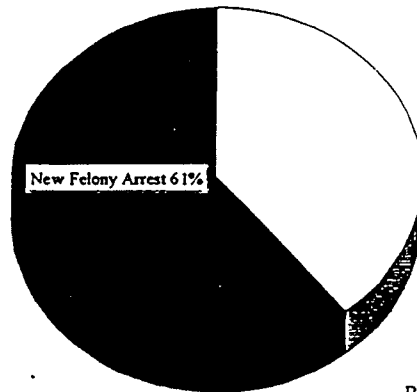


Chart 3

As illustrated in **Chart No. 3**, the new Parole Board is making more violent offenders serve longer past their minimum date. This trend, again, demonstrates that a premium is placed on public safety.

It also has a useful by-product: Keeping violent felons longer than their court imposed date has helped the department to secure more federal funding for housing assaultive offenders. Michigan was awarded \$14.7 million in Fiscal Year 1996 for keeping the rate above 100 percent. The state expects to qualify for an additional \$14 million to \$15 million in Fiscal Year 1997.

**NEW FELONY ARREST WITHIN 3 YEARS  
OF DISCHARGE ON MAXIMUM SENTENCE**



Based on cases discharged in 1994.

Chart 4

Perhaps one of the most important benchmarks of how well the Parole Board operates is to look at the population the Parole Board *refuses* to release — offenders who serve the entire length of their court-imposed sentence.

**Chart No. 4** shows that, of the prisoners forced to serve their maximum sentence since 1994, 61 percent had been arrested for new felonies by 1997. This fact clearly demonstrates the board's intent to keep those prisoners who it believes represent a threat to society for as long as possible.

Similarly it can be estimated that in 1996 alone, 966 violent felons would have been let out on parole if the overhaul had not taken place. These felons remained locked up, exposing Michigan's communities to fewer dangers for substantially longer periods of time. It is impossible to estimate what crimes they might have committed had they been paroled.

### PERCENT INCREASE IN PRISONERS SERVING MAXIMUM SENTENCE

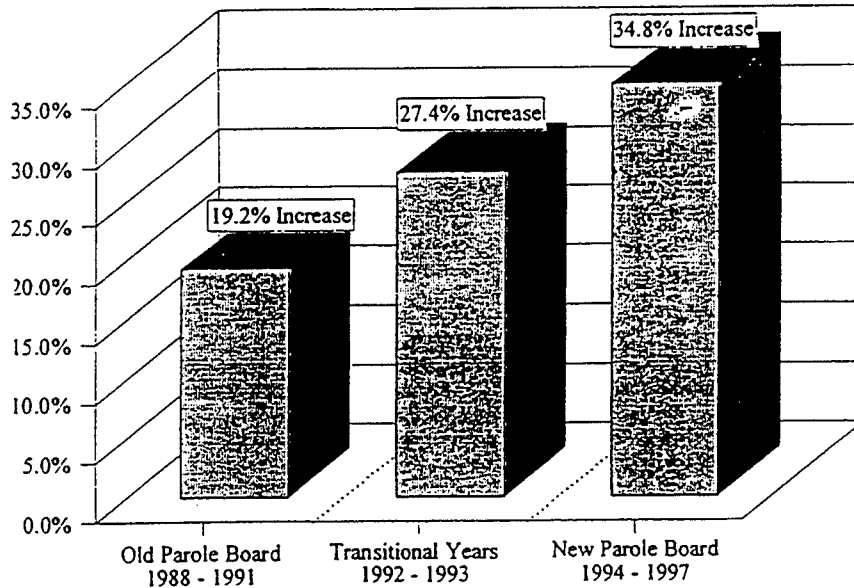


Chart 5

More prisoners are now serving their maximum sentence, as illustrated by **Chart No. 5**. Referring back to **Chart No. 4**, it is easy to see why the new Parole Board feels more prisoners should be serving out the full length of their sentences and kept as long as possible — to do as little harm as possible to society.

There is a similar increase in the number of prisoners who are serving more than 10 years for assaultive crimes. *Excluding* Life sentences, the population of prisoners serving more than 10 years has gone up more than 33 percent, to 10,000 by the end of 1996 from 7,500 at the end of 1991.

## ANNUAL RETURNS TO PRISON FOR VIOLATION OF PAROLE RULES

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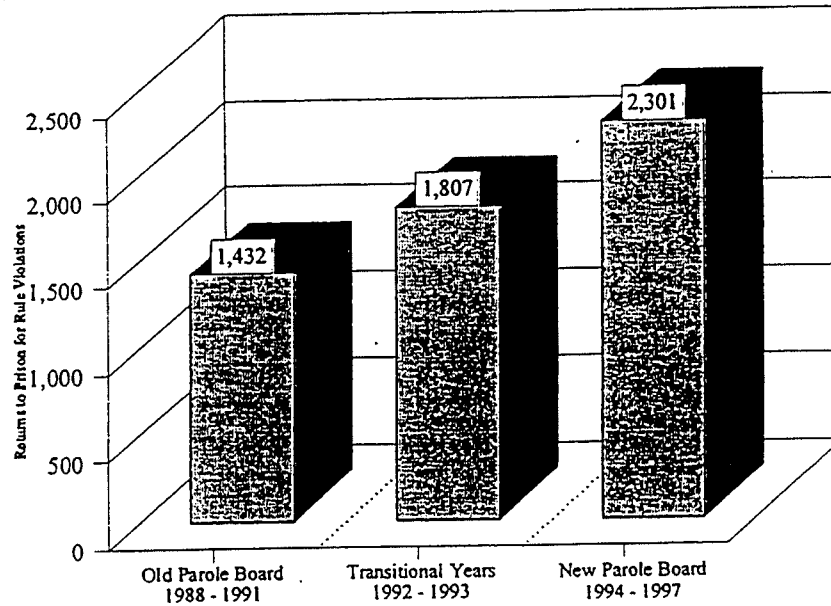


CHART 6

Chart No. 6 shows the increased willingness of the department to revoke parole at the first sign of trouble. Often, this allows the department to regain control of a parolee who has not lived up to the scrutiny placed upon him or her by the department.

No other indicator is probably more reflective of the enlightened approach to corrections the department has taken in the past five to six years.



## NUMBER OF PROBATION AND PAROLE AGENTS

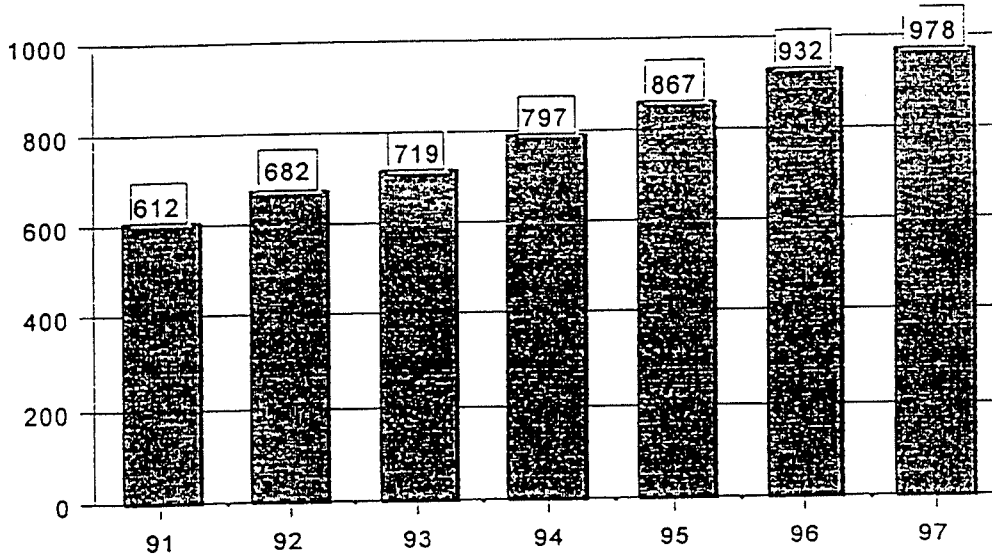


Chart 7

By increasing its field operations staff, the MDOC now has the ability to monitor parolees more closely and return more rule violators before they have a chance to commit a new crime. This practice puts teeth into the parole system, and it lets prisoners know that, once they are on parole they have to make a continuous effort to improve or face sanctions. It also gives the public more confidence in the system, letting taxpayers know that parole is not an easy ticket to freedom.

**Chart No. 7** strongly indicates the department did more than simply shuffle papers to overhaul a system. It invested in people, beefing up its parole and probation force by more than 50 percent since 1991.

## **The Parole Board**

The core of the parole process is the Parole Board, made up of 10 Michigan citizens.

The preceding charts have illustrated the positive trend taken by the new Parole Board, working within the revised and improved process. The overall trend is attributable, in large part, to the makeup of the new Parole Board — a more conservative Parole Board.

On average, these new members have backgrounds more heavily grounded in law enforcement and prosecution when compared to the previous board, all of whom were bureaucrats without such backgrounds. Appointments are now made by the director of the Michigan Department of Corrections and run for staggered, four-year terms. They are no longer part of Civil Service. This fundamental change gives the new Parole Board unprecedented accountability.

Accountability, though, would mean nothing unless there were also board members who have a long, proven background in day-to-day association with citizens.

Accomplished members of the law enforcement community bring a seasoned, professional approach to the criminal justice system. Former law enforcement officials and prosecutors, accustomed to dealing first-hand with criminals, are also able to respond well to public demand because of their background in dealing with citizens and being noticeable members of their communities.

### **The members:**

**Stephen H. Marschke, Chairman**

**William A. Slaughter**

**John A. Hallacy**

**Maurice Armstrong**

**Barbara Queen Johnson**

**Margie R. McNutt**

**Charles E. Braddock**

**Andrea J. Morse**

**William B. Reed**

**Ronald E. Gach**

Parole Board members held these jobs: Three police officers, one prosecutor, one victims' rights advocate, a foster care specialist, a probation supervisor, a pre-trial investigator, a prison warden and a court clerk. The average age is 46.

### **SUMMARY:**

No amount of charts and words can demonstrate the importance of overhauling the old parole board. The shift to make offenders take more responsibility for their actions, and to suffer the consequences if they don't, has helped to keep more violent and chronic offenders behind bars than ever before.

There are an untold number of crimes that they did not commit because they were not paroled at all, were kept for longer periods of time or were returned to prison at the first sign of trouble. It is those crimes that were not committed that has helped make Michigan a better, safer place to live.