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Bretz: 'Good time' change saves \$\$, people

As the LSJ reported Nov. 29, Rep. George Cushingberry, D-Detroit, has introduced bills that would allow prisoners to earn time off their sentences for good behavior. Currently, Michigan prisoners must serve every day of their minimum sentence before parole consideration. This has not always been true.

Like other states, Michigan prisoners were, for decades, able to reduce their sentences by earning "good time." A 1978 initiative petition prohibited these awards. In 1982, with overcrowding on the rise, a much less generous system of "disciplinary credits" was enacted to allow prisoners with no misconduct to reduce their minimum sentences by up to seven days a month. This made people eligible for parole consideration sooner; it did not mean they had to be released. But it provided an additional incentive to follow the rules and had a substantial impact on slowing the growth of the prisoner population.

In the late 1990s, a movement called "truth in sentencing" swept the country. It was fueled by a federal grant program to subsidize prison building. To receive funds, a state had to require prisoners who committed violent offenses to serve, on average, 85 percent of their sentences.

Although Michigan already met this standard, some felt we also needed legislation called truth in sentencing. So, in 1998, we went far past the national norm and eliminated credits altogether.

Today, Michigan is far out of sync with virtually every other jurisdiction. Most states give some amount of credit for good conduct. Many give an additional amount, typically called "earned credit," for participation in work, educational or treatment programs. Even Michigan counties use "sheriffs' good time" to control the size of jail populations and manage inmate behavior.

A return to the former good time system or some combination of disciplinary credits and earned credits is critical to corrections reform. Not only would it save tens of millions of dollars, but rewarding positive behavior is the best tool for permanent change. Prison authorities can control inmates through various sanctions, but anyone who has raised a child or trained an employee knows that, to be effective, the threat of punishment has to be balanced by reward for the desired behavior.

No one claims that restoring a system of credits would negatively affect public safety. Research shows there is no relationship between recidivism and length of stay.

Reducing a short minimum sentence by a few months or a long one by a few years will not cause someone with an excellent institutional record to commit a new crime.

The justification for eliminating all credit is transparency in sentencing. But transparency can be achieved just as easily, and much less expensively, by stating at sentencing that the minimum is subject to reduction by up to X amount of credit.

Those who insist that Michigan's sentencing must be "purer" than every other system in the country

need to explain why that is worth the price.

Additional Facts

Ronald Bretz

is a professor at Cooley Law School in Lansing.
