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Kime: Filling prisons doesn't reduce the crime rate

There is a good deal of controversy over the proposal to restore "good time credits" to Michigan prison sentences. Some law enforcement folk maintain this is just a cost-cutting measure that endangers the public. They are surely right about the fiscal motivation, but get it wrong on the issue of public impact.

We spend so much money locking people up far longer than before that we have had to cut back on police officers and crime prevention programs. In other words we give priority to retaining people in prison for years over keeping them out of it in the first place or making sure those who commit crimes get caught.

But criminologists know that at the felony level certainty of punishment deters more than severity. The crook is not thinking, "I will only do four years if I'm caught instead of five." He is only figuring he won't get caught.

When we ballooned the corrections budget from under 3 percent of the general fund to more than 20 percent, cutting other programs to do it, we gave up certainty for severity.

How can I be so sure that shortening sentences really won't lead to a crime wave? You need only look to our past:

In 1980, Michigan - faced with severe prison crowding, but no money for construction - enacted a "Prison Overcrowding Emergency Powers Act." Whenever the prison count exceeded capacity, many prisoners hit parole eligibility 90 days early. Triggered nine times over five years, these cumulative reductions put thousands on the street, some as much as two years before minimums already reduced by good time allowances.

But it kept the prison population level from 1980 through 1984.

In the fall of 1984, however, two people released early killed a housewife and a policeman. Early releases were stopped, a massive prison construction program began and we eventually got "Truth in Sentencing," which wiped out good time and otherwise kept people in prison much longer.

In 1985, the prison system held some 13,000 prisoners, as it had five years earlier. During the next five years, \$900 million was spent in building prisons, and the number of prisoners more than doubled to 29,000.

Then, as now, many people decried the "early release of thousands of dangerous criminals" and applauded the construction as a boon to public protection

What actually happened? During the five years when those thousands of prisoners were let out early, reported crime in Michigan decreased slightly. And by 1989, with more than twice as many people locked up, there was actually an increase of some 32,000 reported crimes. A massive, if unplanned, "natural experiment."

Many factors influence crime totals. But people have long understood that reasonable allowances for good behavior make sense, and are not really deceptive. The real fraud is with so-called "Truth in Sentencing" laws, which under that benign title leads us to waste many precious tax dollars on a policy that has no visible impact at all on crime.

Additional Facts

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