



LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION

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Commission Urges Focus on Women Offenders

The State could save money, improve public safety and break the cycle of crime if it reformed the way it incarcerates women offenders and supervises them on parole, the Little Hoover Commission concluded Wednesday.

While the number of women in California prisons increased five-fold over the past two decades, primarily for drug-related offenses, the State has not adequately changed how it manages facilities or the parole system to break the cycle of criminal behavior. The consequences of this failure are particularly high given the large number of children affected.

More than half of the 10,000 women in California's prisons and 12,000 women on parole lived with their minor children prior to their arrest. Among those women, two-thirds were single parents. Research shows these children are at a higher risk of behavioral problems, and involvement in foster care and the criminal justice systems.

"If we fail to intervene effectively in the lives of these mothers and their children now, California will pay the cost for generations to come," said Commissioner Teddie Ray, chairwoman of the study subcommittee.

California's prison system costs taxpayers more than \$5 billion a year. Of that, the State spends \$1.5 billion on male and female offenders after they have completed their prison terms - most of it re-incarcerating parole violators. Nearly half of women parolees violate conditions of their parole and end up back in prison, and 90 percent of those violations are for non-violent behavior.

"At this moment, no one can credibly defend California's correctional policies or be satisfied with the Department of Corrections' capacity to administer those policies," Commission Chairman Michael E. Alpert said.

Most female felons were victims before they were offenders, most are single parents, and most were convicted of non-violent, drug or property crimes. The Commission urged the State to develop a new strategy for women offenders that relies less on large and remote prisons designed to incapacitate violent offenders and more on community correctional facilities that can better reconnect paroling women to jobs, housing, emotional supports and their families.

The report is a follow up to a 2003 study in which the Commission concluded that California's parole system was a "billion dollar failure." The Commission recommended that the State establish independent oversight of the parole system to ensure the State relies on programs that have been proven to reduce recidivism. It also urged that communities be given responsibility for assisting parolees with housing, employment and drug treatment, along with the resources now spent by the State for those purposes.

In this report, the Commission challenged the State to be smart on crime – not just tough on crime – and to start with women offenders.

"Fixing the system for women parolees also can be a good test of the correctional system's desire and capacity to improve. Lessons learned improving outcomes for women can inspire and guide the management of the critically necessary larger reforms," Alpert said.

Reducing crime, violence and drug abuse among women, research shows, will require a strategy tailored to the characteristics of female offenders. Among them:

Female offenders are less violent. More than two-thirds of female inmates in California prisons were convicted of a non-violent property or drug-related crime, compared to 50 percent of their male counterparts who have been convicted of a crime against another person.

The majority of female offenders also are victims. Nationally, 57 percent of female offenders have been physically or sexually abused before going to prison, compared to 16 percent of male offenders.

Female offenders are far more likely to be single parents. Nationally, of those offenders living with their children prior to arrest, 46 percent of female offenders were living in a single-parent household, compared to 15 percent of male offenders.

To reduce the number of women who return to prison, the State should address these needs using proven, gender-specific correctional strategies and reducing barriers to reintegration, such as the ban on welfare assistance for drug addicts.

The Department of Corrections has been under intense scrutiny over the past several years for a series of failures, from inmate abuse and cost overruns to dismal outcomes. Many critics, including the Commission, doubt that the system can correct itself.

The Commission said real reforms will require independent, public and performance based oversight to guide and monitor the efforts. In 2003, the Commission suggested that the Board of Corrections assume that role.

The Department of Corrections also is only one part of the correctional continuum. The Commission reiterated that to improve parole outcomes the State must work hand-in-hand with local law enforcement, child welfare, community and faith-based organizations.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to increase the performance of state programs. The Commission's recommendations are sent to the Governor and the Legislature. The report, *Breaking the Barriers for Women on Parole*, is available on the Commission's Web site: www.lhc.ca.gov/lhc.html.