

Planning for Prisoner Reentry into Our Communities

Statement by

Rulette V. Armstead, Assistant Chief of Police
San Diego Police Department
San Diego, CA

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I am Assistant Chief of Police Rulette Armstead of the San Diego Police Department. I am pleased to have been invited here today to provide the Little Hoover Commission with information about prisoner reentry into our communities and to speak specifically about the elements and goals of the San Diego Reentry Roundtable project, known as the San Diego Dialogue.

My goal here today is to provide you with the San Diego Police Department's perspective on the responsibility that public and private entities should have for successful reintegration of offenders into our communities. Our perspective closely mirrors that of the various entities that have come together to form the San Diego Dialogue Project.

I will begin by talking briefly about the City of San Diego and the policing philosophy of the San Diego Police Department. The City of San Diego has a population of more than 1.2 million people. It is a diverse city with more than 131 different cultures and 31 different languages being spoken. It is a border city due to its close proximity to Mexico. It is a beautiful city with picturesque bays, beaches and an excellent climate. As such, it is a tourist city. It is also home to approximately 6,000 homeless individuals, many with mental illnesses. Approximately 3,455 parolees live in this city. Some are homeless. Others are mentally ill. Many suffer both plights.

For more than fifteen (15) years, the policing philosophy in the City of San Diego has been one of a commitment to community-oriented policing. The Department has initiated a multitude of proactive efforts to enhance police-community involvement and interaction. This ensures on-going open dialogue, which supports mutual problem-solving efforts with all sectors of our communities. We are known nationally and internationally as a leader in community-oriented policing.

We have made tremendous gains in training our officers on interacting with the homeless and the mentally ill. We currently have Homeless Outreach Teams and Psychiatric Emergency Response Teams. Unfortunately, as with other policing agencies throughout California, we have not been as proactive in dealing with our parolees. We have used incarceration as the answer to the public safety risk of prisoner reentry into our communities.

When former prisoners are released back into our communities, their freedom creates a host of issues that complicate the reintegration process. Research has shown that released inmates continue to experience many of the challenges they struggled with prior to incarceration. These challenges are manifested in high rates of mental illness, substance abuse, infectious diseases, homelessness and unemployment. According to Jeremy Travis and Sarah Lawrence of the Urban Institute, nationally, two-thirds of parolees will be arrested within three years, and 40 percent will be returned to custody for new crimes or for parole violations. The San Diego Police Department Crime Analysis Unit reports that from January 1 through November 30, 2002, 2,592 arrests were made for parole violations in the City of San Diego.

These issues present serious problems for families of former inmates, law enforcement and our communities in general. I believe that community-based public and private entities share the responsibility for developing comprehensive, coordinated, proactive strategies that will enhance the public safety, health, and cohesion of our communities as we respond to the parole reintegration cycle.

Treatment provided to parolees must be comprehensive in nature. As the Department of Health and Human Services indicates, "It must attend to all the needs of the individual and help him or her to becoming a fully productive member of society. This means that a continuum of care is crucial for success, including offering treatment and services to individuals as they transition into the community. These programs must provide a combination of behavioral treatment, medications and other services, such as referral to medical, psychological and social service." The array of services must be tailored to the needs of the individual.

From a criminal justice perspective, there must be a philosophical shift for each criminal justice policy-making entity. Law enforcement should be engaged in supporting the reentry process rather than narrowly limiting their role to apprehension. Perhaps parole departments should consider shifting their focus from revocation and incarceration to support services aimed at successful reintegration.

In California, the number of parole violators returned to prison increased 2,884 percent compared to over 600 percent nationally. California is now the national leader in sending parolees back to prison according to data published by the Bureau of Justice statistics. California has made some policy choices that have brought us to this reality.

One reason is that when the state abandoned indeterminate sentencing in 1977, it kept a system of parole supervision in place. Other states made different choices. California puts nearly everyone released under supervision. In a 1998 report on the issue of parole violations in California, the Legislative Analyst's Office pointed to the tough policies of the Bureau of Prison Terms that have resulted in more technical violations and longer prison terms.

This form of punishment is very expensive. Professor Michael Jacobson of the City University of New York states that California spends \$900 million a year to house parole violators. The benefits of the current policies are uncertain. There is no research documenting the link between revocation policies like those seen in California and reductions and recidivism, according to the Urban Institute.

Toward this end, the San Diego Police Department believes that successful reentry management of parolees into neighborhoods must be multi-disciplinary in nature. Successful reentry should be the goal of Parole, law enforcement and other criminal justice and correctional agencies, as well as local entities, working together in diverse partnerships. For this reason, our Department enthusiastically responded to the San Diego Reentry Dialogue request to assist in developing an effective, community-based and comprehensive strategy for prisoner reentry into the City of San Diego.

People released from prison generally return to the area where they lived prior to incarceration. In the year 2000, 62 percent of parolees released from California State Prisons returned to counties in Southern California. Of these, 11 percent returned to San Diego County. Of those returning to San Diego County, about half returned to the City of San Diego. As previously mentioned, there are approximately 3,455 parolees living in the City of San Diego.

Parolees released to San Diego have increased significantly in the last two decades and are currently over two times the levels experienced in the 1980's. Over half (55 percent) of all releases to San Diego are following a return to prison for a technical violation, usually a violation of a condition of parole. Parolees living in the City of San Diego tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods located in the downtown area and south and east of downtown. These neighborhoods account for 44 percent of the City's population and 50 percent of the parole population, according to the Urban Institute. These areas also tend to have the highest violent crime rates.

Nearly half of all prison releases involve drug offenses. Drug crimes have replaced property crimes as the most common offense among releases returning to San Diego County, according to SANDAG.

With the high number of parolees released to San Diego increasing, San Diego has demonstrated a high level of interest from a broad array of organizations, at different levels of government and community capacities, in developing an effective strategy on prisoner reentry. With funding support from the Price Family Charitable Fund and the San Diego Community Foundation, a multi-disciplinary group of local policy makers, social service practitioners and researchers recently came together in a series of meetings to create the San Diego Reentry Roundtable. The Urban Institute facilitated the meetings. The purpose of the meetings was to develop concrete strategies that focus on the neighborhoods hardest hit by the incarceration and return from prison of a large number of individuals in San Diego County.

The Roundtable participants articulated their vision of the elements needed to implement a comprehensive reentry system in San Diego. The participants focused on better preparation and support for returning prisoners; assisting families before and during the reentry process; developing a new model for community involvement and pushing for changes in policy and practice. Three related missions from the San Diego vision emerged: (1) Developing a comprehensive approach to the reentry process that engages the prisoner, their families and communities; (2) Identifying and enhancing the services most in need; and (3) Developing a new vision for justice. From this discussion, the following model for an effective reentry process in San Diego County was developed.

1) Building the Concentric Circles of Support

The Roundtable participants agreed that a comprehensive approach to reentry is required to meet the varied needs of returning prisoners and their families. Rather than concentrating on one aspect of prisoner reentry to the exclusion of others, the Roundtable participants pointed to the need for a multifaceted approach to the reentry process that includes engaging the prisoner, their families and the community

- **Prepare the Prisoner**
All prisoners return to their community with the potential for turning their lives around and the potential for risk. The idea is to increase the potential for positive outcomes and reduce the potential for risk. Interventions should begin at the time of admission to prison and focus on the period of transition from prison to home.
- **Assist the Family for Reentry**
In developing interventions for parolees, the reentry plan should also address the family dynamics of reentry. This includes issues of family reunification, child custody and support, and domestic violence. Families should be prepared for the return of a family member from prison so they know what to expect. One participant pointed to the military model of an “ombudsman” that would work with families of people in prison to provide information and support during the incarceration and upon release.
- **Create Community Networks**
Engage the community to become involved in improving the reintegration process for former prisoners, which the group agreed would lead to improved outcomes for all involved. This includes engaging family members, mentors and community institutions like the universities. The group also agreed that former prisoners could be important community resources by serving as positive role models to recently released prisoners.
- **Educate the Public**
In order to combat the NIMBY (Not In My BackYard) issue, the group thought that any community plan for reentry should include a public education campaign. This is an important component to building strong and effective community networks.

2) Concentrating on the Realities of Reentry

The group identified the most critical service issues to be addressed by the community's reentry plan---that is, the most pressing issues for parolees returning to San Diego.

- **Creation of a Community Resource Center**
A centralized community resource center would serve as a facilitator of services in the community to ensure coordination and a community-based approach to linking parolees and their families with those services. Service linkages would include the following:
 - Transitional housing (need to address the NIMBY issue)
 - Prison to work (need business community to join planning efforts)
 - Continuity of health care (need the mental health community to join planning efforts)

- **Relentless Focus on Drug and Alcohol Abuse**
Substance abuse assessment and treatment services were identified as a particularly critical need in the community. The group would like to see increased availability of treatment services and suggested applying the Drug Court model to the reentry population. In these courts, conditions of supervision are openly agreed to and openly enforced. If a new crime is committed, all bets are off and the parolee is prosecuted for the new crime. However, violations of the conditions of parole, the technical violations that now fill up the prisons, are handled with appropriate support services, close judicial monitoring, graduated sanctions for failure to meet conditions and local arrests where needed to enforce the orders of the court.

3) Developing a New Vision for Justice

The Roundtable participants also agreed that the key players in the criminal justice system should adopt new ways of doing business in the community that are supportive of successful reentry outcomes. They pointed out that each agency should be responsible for thinking about the back end of the criminal justice system---that is, promoting effective reintegration. For the San Diego Roundtable participants that means creating new partnerships across agencies with the common goal of enhancing public safety through efforts to support successful reentry transitions. Successful reentry will result in significant reductions in recidivism, drug use, parole revocations and a reduced reliance on prisons. The participants outlined the following ways in which this new vision of justice could be achieved:

- Judges should follow an individual through the system from trial to sentencing to release and be accountable for outcomes after release. Participants suggested applying the Drug Court model to the reentry population.

- Police should be engaged in supporting the reentry process rather than limiting their role to apprehension.
- Prosecutors should also expand the definition of their role in the reentry process beyond securing convictions to involve themselves in problem-solving efforts at the individual and community levels.
- Public Defenders, while representing individual clients, should expand their vision to advocate for the well being of the entire community.
- Corrections should be accountable for adequately preparing a prisoner for release back to the community.
- Parole should shift its focus from an emphasis on revocations and strict surveillance to supportive services aimed at a facilitating reintegration.
- Probation should focus on the realities of prisoner reentry and develop accountability measures for public safety and offender reintegration, according to the Urban Institute.

The evaluation and measurement component of the San Diego reentry strategy is still being formulated. At the last session of the San Diego Dialogue forum, in October 2002, the group decided that an independent evaluator would conduct the assessment. The group felt it was imperative to identify the specific desired outcomes of the project that would be measured. There was much discussion of the need to have sound evaluation measures and not merely numbers and statistics. There was also much discussion on the need for the evaluator to be mindful of “theory vs. reality,” community input and involvement, and parolee input into the process.

Dr. Natalie Pearl of San Diego State University has agreed to organize the primary evaluation effort. This will be done in conjunction with San Diego based, SANDAG, a planning and research organization.

Around the country there is a renewed interest in this area of criminal justice policy. Many question why California relies on incarceration as the answer to this public safety risk. There may be other strategies out there for managing newly released prisoners that may be less costly and equally protective of society. The San Diego Reentry Dialogue is working to integrate some of those strategies.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before this Commission. I will be happy to respond to any questions you may have.