

California Is Not Prepared for Realignment

California will have to start diverting low-level felony offenders and parole violators to county jails. The question is, "How will these counties manage this huge influx of returning prisoners?"

By Kim Carter, Contributor

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In this year's ruling of *Brown v. Plata*, the Supreme Court held that the conditions in California's overcrowded prisons were so bad that they violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Having ordered the state to reduce the prison population by more than 30,000 inmates, California will now have to start diverting low-level felony offenders and parole violators to county jails. The new law AB 109, also known as, "realignment," goes into effect October 1, 2011. Counties are scrambling to come up with a plan to address this issue. The question is, "How will these counties manage this huge influx of returning prisoners?"

If local governments try to house these individuals in county jails, the problem has only shifted from the state to the county level. The capacity is just not there to house every single inmate. This is why many of them will be on supervised released, also known as probation. Needless to say, the counties are ill prepared to handle a situation of this magnitude.

For the past ten years I have worked at the state level of government, with the department of corrections and our local police departments on reducing recidivism, and crime. I have been educating, informing and advocating about the issues related to incarceration along with some of the best criminologist in this country. Unfortunately, our cries fell on deaf ears and the state went on an incarceration frenzy with little regard for the evidence produced that would reduce the prison population and ensure public safety. Now, what troubles me is the lack of investment in prevention and intervention that is needed in our communities. While millions of dollars are allocated toward keeping people locked up in county jails, ankle bracelets, and hiring more staff for the district attorney and probation departments, there is no money being placed in the community towards preventing someone from climbing through your window at night. Simply put, prisoner re-entry programs and other basic services have not historically been a priority in major budget decisions, and they are certainly not this time around with the new realignment laws.

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Denying these people the opportunity to reunite with their families because of restrictive housing laws, blocking every attempt at gainful employment because of their past record, and reducing their positive re-entry attempt to that of one winning the lottery will not ensure our public safety. It's elementary -- If a person is homeless he or she will seek refuge in abandoned buildings, doorways and under the bridge. If that individual is starving, he or she may begin to steal food. If that individual runs into the many discriminatory barriers designed to create a sense of hopelessness and despair, then that individual is capable of anything.

We can't continue to ignore the fact that unless those being released have access to basic necessities, food, clothing, shelter and the opportunity to provide for their children, we can't feel safe in our own homes. This time we need to fight so these people can live with their families in public housing. If it's been determined that within a 50-mile radius there are no jobs, housing or other legal means of support then we should allow them to leave and go where there are other options instead of mandating that they stay here and become desperate and discouraged. Some of the laws make no sense at all.

I'm afraid of what will happen when thousands of folks come back to our communities and find that there is no hope. That millions of dollars have been misappropriated and instead of a glimpse of opportunity in the community, there is only disgust, despair and degradation.

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My organization, Time for Change Foundation, has been providing housing and supportive services to people leaving prisons since 2002. Our evidence-based models have eliminated people from re-committing crimes. My publication, titled "[Invisible Bars: Barriers to Women's Health & Well-Being During and After Incarceration](#)," provides qualitative and quantitative assessments on subject matters regarding barriers to re-entry and social support services, and successful methods towards reducing recidivism.

Californians are being used as guinea pigs. While public safety is getting new computers, tracking devices, probation officers, we're all sitting ducks. All the taxpayer dollars are invested in the "aftermath," but I'd feel much safer if we had equally invested in prevention and intervention.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Isn't it time we did something? Who is next?

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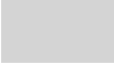


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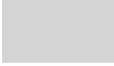
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