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The State

Rate of repeat inmates low

Despite numbers, Sanford maintains lowering recidivism in the state remains a top priority

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South Carolina inmates who are freed go back to prison at almost half the national rate - and the state's rate is dropping steadily.

That flies in the face of Gov.-elect Mark Sanford's contention that prison recidivism is one of the most critical problems he wants his new Corrections Department director to fix.

Across the nation, 52 percent of about 273,000 freed inmates in 1994 were incarcerated again after three years.

The most comparable figures available show that 32 percent of 11,843 S.C. inmates released in 1994 went back to prison within three years.

But Sanford said a 32 percent rate is a "pathetic measure" and unacceptable for South Carolina.

It also does not fit with what police tell him about how often they arrest criminals who have already been in prison.

"What we have, by any measure, does not work given the numbers of people going back into that system," Sanford said.

"If you look at the recidivism rate in South Carolina and in this country, there's something wrong with the criminal justice system."

When he raised the recidivism issue, Sanford did not know the rates.

When he learned on Friday about the state's relatively good showing, he said, "I would still say that we would look for any way possible to drive those numbers down."

Sanford's choice to run the state's prisons, Jon Ozmint, said that 35 percent of S.C. inmates released each year return to prison.

But the Corrections Department's most recent report shows the return rate is 28 percent. And that's within three years of an inmate's release - not annually as Ozmint said.

The lock-up rate drops to 10 percent within a year of freedom.

Those numbers are from inmates released in 1998, the last time the Corrections Department conducted a survey, said spokeswoman Cheryl Bates-Lee.

"GOOD" NUMBER FOR SOUTH CAROLINA

Corrections specialist Joann Morton of the University of South Carolina said the differences between Sanford's and Ozmint's opinions and the back-to-prison statistics raises questions about their knowledge of prisons.

"You need to understand what the system is doing and has been doing before you come up with a plan to move it forward," Morton said. "And that's why it's so important to have background and experience in

Corrections."

Ozmint, a former prosecutor, acknowledges he has no experience in running prisons. He said he will rely on the guidance of professionals within the agency.

Morton said South Carolina's ranking looks even better because the state's incarceration rate is among the nation's highest.

"That's a very low recidivism rate," Morton said. "It speaks well for the programs and services we've had in place for the last several years."

A 1999 survey by the Corrections Yearbook ranks South Carolina fifth in the nation in the proportion of its residents it locks up - 574 of every 100,000.

Louisiana and Texas led the nation with 738 per 100,000 and 735 per 100,000, respectively.

Yet Louisiana's back-to-prison rate is 50 percent and Texas has a 41 percent rate, according to the yearbook, a recognized source on prisons. Louisiana and Texas are viewed as having among the nation's most punitive prisons, Corrections specialists said.

There's no standard for an acceptable number of inmates who return to prison, Morton said.

"If you're a victim, one recidivist is one recidivist too many. It's a matter of what the public is willing to tolerate."

COMPARISONS TOUGH

There are few national yardsticks because states use so many different ways of determining recidivism.

Some count only criminal violations. Some count only felonies. Some track inmates just one year after their release. Some don't count at all.

South Carolina tracks by fiscal years. The national study used a calendar year.

The biggest study ever done was released last spring. In comparison, South Carolina's recidivism rate is about 60 percent of the nation's.

The U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics tracked 272,111 inmates in 15 states - two-thirds of all prisoners freed in the United States in 1994. South Carolina was not one of those states.

The U.S. study found that 51.8 percent of freed prisoners were back in prison within three years, either for a new crime or probation or parole violations.

South Carolina's own comparable survey found that 31.9 percent of inmates released in 1994 were back in prison within three years.

MEASURING THE PROBLEM

The S.C. Corrections Department does not analyze the reason former inmates return to prison.

But one indicator, considered incomplete, is that 12 percent of criminals on probation or parole were charged with another crime and sent back to prison last year.

Probation and parole agency figures show that 5,610 offenders violated the conditions of their releases in 2002, spokesman Pete O'Boyle said.

The vast majority, 88 percent, were for technical violations, such as failing to pay restitution or not meeting with a probation officer, O'Boyle said.

Nationally, about half the inmates went back to prison because they committed another crime, said Pat Langan, a researcher on the study. The rest violated probation or parole rules.

South Carolina's back-to-prison rate is substantially lower than Georgia's and North Carolina's.

The Peach State's rate is 39 percent, its most recent figures show. The Tar Heel State's is 31 percent, but it doesn't count probation or parole violators.

Another interpretation of S.C.'s low return-to-prison rate is that it shows the state is perhaps imprisoning people it shouldn't, USC's Morton said.

Offenders with short sentences for lesser crimes might need probation, punishment in local jails or community service programs, she said.

"We take in anyone with a sentence of more than 90 days. We don't have misdemeanor probation in this state," Morton said. "The judge has to send you to the Department of Corrections or let you lose."