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Drop in N.J.'s prison population defies trend

The 14% drop since 1999 is credited to more paroles — and fewer returns for violations.

By Robert Moran
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TRENTON - Bucking a national trend, the state prison population in New Jersey has shrunk 14 percent since it reached an all-time high of 31,300 in July 1999.

The decline is largely due to a sharp drop in parole violators sent back to prison and a substantial increase in paroles, state records show.

After years of hard-line policies on lawbreakers, New Jersey is following a more measured, reasonable course, state officials say.

"In most of the late '80s and the '90s, it was a law-and-order approach of 'lock 'em up and throw away the key,' " said John D'Amico Jr., chairman of the New Jersey State Parole Board and a retired Superior Court judge.

Those policies "were not effective and not fiscally responsible," he said.

The trend in New Jersey is running counter to the growth of prison populations around the country.

In Pennsylvania, the number of state inmates continues to swell. For the first time ever, the number topped 41,000 in February.

Nationally, prisons and jails held 2.13 million inmates as of June 30, up 2.3 percent from a year earlier, according to a federal report.

Having fewer inmates in New Jersey, however, has not made running the Department of Corrections any cheaper.

The cost to maintain the prison system and pay other custody expenses has grown nearly 16 percent in six years, from \$810.3 million in fiscal 1999 to \$939.6 million in 2005, according to department figures.

Much of the increase was due to rising payroll expenses, health-care costs for inmates, and new programs, such as a post-incarceration program for sex offenders, Assistant Corrections Commissioner Peter Roselli said.

"The costs are very large," he said.

The state is paying for about 1,000 more employees now than in 1999, and most of the increase comes from new corrections officers.

Corrections Commissioner Devon Brown said the cost of running the prison system would not go down - "not when the salaries keep going up."

While the state has been unable to rein in prison spending, it has drawn praise for new programs and policies that ease inmates' transition to freedom.

The total prison population, which includes a small percentage in halfway houses, was 26,911 in January, nearly 4,400 fewer than in 1999.

The population in New Jersey's 14 correctional institutions has remained relatively steady, Roselli said. Most of the population reduction was achieved by scaling back the use of county jails to relieve prison overcrowding.

One reason New Jersey has fewer inmates is the increase in paroles.

In 1999, about 3,100 inmates were granted parole. The next year, the state was taken to court over a massive backlog of parole-eligible inmates. A settlement that year led to an elimination of the backlog and speedier parole consideration.

Last year, nearly 8,000 inmates were paroled.

D'Amico said the state had been able to grant more paroles because of an increase in community treatment programs available for inmates otherwise ready for release.

"We have more places to put them," he said.

In 2003, the State Parole Board adopted a policy to discourage automatic parole revocations for "technical" violations, such as flunking drug tests or failing to report to parole officers.

In 1999, more than 5,400 parole violators were sent back to prison. Last year, fewer than 2,900 were sent back.

Parole officers now use a system of graduated sanctions that may include increased supervision and placement in "halfway back" programs.

The officers' workweek was lengthened several hours so parolees had more flexibility to report in as required.

Despite more paroles and fewer returns for violations, state officials said, there is no increased threat to public safety.

Burlington County Prosecutor Robert D. Bernardi, past president of the County Prosecutors Association of New Jersey, expressed some concern that heavy caseloads were a burden on parole officers, but he declined to sound an alarm.

"Do I think they do a pretty good job with the resources they have? I would have to say yes," Bernardi said.

Also keeping people out of prison are state drug courts, launched in Camden and Newark in 1996.

Last year, 729 people destined for prison were allowed to enroll in the diversionary program, said Carol Venditto, the statewide drug court manager.

Elaine Selan, cofounder of And Justice for All, a prisoner-advocacy group in Philadelphia, praised what she described as new leadership and thinking in the Department of Corrections and on the Parole Board.

"There is a more concerted effort to help individuals stay out of the system," Selan said.

Jeremy Travis, president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and author of *But They All Come Back*, a new book about prisoner reentry into society, said New Jersey was a leader in dealing with prisoner reentry.

"I think people are realizing that the other shoe has dropped," Travis said.

"We have far too many people in prison," he said.

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