

A quick solution to prison overcrowding?

Statistics show prisons house thousands of inmates who are good candidates for parole.

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State corrections officials are recommending building new prisons to alleviate crowding, but new statistics show that thousands of bunks are occupied by the lowest-risk convicts who are eligible for parole — many of whom already work outside security fences as minimum-security trusties.

Thousands more are classified as minimum-security, serving time for minor property and drug crimes, and could be good candidates for parole if funding were available for them to complete drug- and alcohol-abuse programs, according to figures by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which runs the state's prisons.

"It appears we're probably wasting millions of dollars filling up beds with people who don't need to be there," Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston, said after reviewing the statistics. He and other lawmakers asked for the statistics, which were also obtained by the Austin American-Statesman.

"The more I see, the more I think we do not have a capacity issue. We have an operations issue," Whitmire said.

Prison officials are seeking more than 11,000 new beds, many of them for treatment programs, but Whitmire and other lawmakers say they see at least that many inmates who could be released to free up space.

The new statistics — and legislative leaders' interpretation of them — promise to fuel arguments that Texas should enhance its parole, probation and treatment programs before building expensive prisons. The Sunset Advisory Commission, which periodically reviews all state agencies, is scheduled to vote next week on the various alternatives. Its recommendations will be forwarded to the Legislature for consideration.

Prison and parole officials agreed that more treatment programs are needed and that those programs could free up some beds, but they denied Monday that other bunks are being filled with convicts who should not be imprisoned. They noted that funding for treatment programs was drastically cut by the Legislature four years ago.

Rissie Owens, chairwoman of the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, said that just because people are classified as minimum-security in prison does not mean that they are ready for, or are a good risk for, parole.

"We make decisions based on public safety," she said. "It's much different" than the way prison officials make security-classification decisions.

The new statistics show that of the 135,210 convicts in state prisons on Sept. 30, 5,687 were trustees who are eligible for parole. Most were serving time for drug and property crimes. Most were in their 40s. Most were serving sentences of 10 to 25 years.

"Yes, we have minimum-security inmates in medium and maximum-security beds," said House Corrections Committee Chairman Jerry Madden, R-Richardson. "Should they be there? In a lot of cases, probably not. Is there a better use of those beds? Absolutely."

Some other minimum-security prisoners were serving time for offenses such as manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, some types of sex crimes and other violent crimes. But 5,481 were in prison for drunken-driving offenses — charges that, in many cases, require inmates to complete an alcohol-treatment program before they can be paroled.

"There are long waiting lists for those programs, so people sit in prison much longer than they should," Whitmire said. "We have 900 or so who are approved for parole but who have not been paroled because the programs they have to complete as a condition for parole are not available."

Whitmire said he is convinced that the large number of parole-ready trustees is a case of prison officials not wanting to lose valuable help. Outside trustees work as porters, help in offices and do field and community service labor. Inside minimum-security prisoners serve as cooks and janitors and do laundry and other chores.

"I'm convinced the reason we're not paroling more of these people is that they're the workers," he said. "If they're a low-enough risk that they are allowed outside without close supervision, why not parole them and put them on a monitoring bracelet, and open up that bed for someone else?"

"Based on these numbers, I think we should take a look at every bed we have, and who is in it, before we build any more," Whitmire said.

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