

## PRISONS NEED MAJOR CHANGES

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From top to bottom, Louisiana's prison system is not working. With prisons and jails overflowing, many dangerous criminals are being returned to the streets to commit more crimes.

The fact that similar conditions exist in many other states is no consolation to Louisiana and its crime-fearing citizens.

It is time for Louisiana's citizens, their political leaders and criminal justice officials to come to grips with the chronic problem. And they will need the understanding if not cooperation of federal judges who have forced the problem.

"Prison overcrowding" is both a cliché and a symptom of the times. The phrase does not begin to cover all it really means.

Here is how it goes.

1. The federal courts, beginning in 1973, put a lid on how many inmates the state can keep in state prisons.
2. Rising crime increases public demand for tougher laws and longer sentences, and elected officials respond accordingly.
3. As the crime rate increases, more criminals are arrested and many are given longer sentences.
4. Because the courts have capped the number of inmates that can be kept in state prisons, the state inmate population backs up until Orleans Parish Prison and other local jails lack enough space to contain the growing ranks of prisoners.
5. Even as more state and local prisons are built, crime, arrests and convictions continue to grow, causing inmate populations to incessantly outstrip the available state and local prison space.
6. To make room, judges and sheriffs free prisoners they determine are the least dangerous. Tragic mistakes are inevitable.
7. The overloaded system has ruptured. It is not working.

What can and should be done?

In the short term, the state obviously needs to build more prisons to live up to its responsibility to house state inmates.

But, as reporter Michael Perlstein of The Times-Picayune reported in a Sunday special report, other states have found that they cannot build their way out of the prison overpopulation problem. Louisiana will not be able to, either.

Other states have begun to work with alternatives to simple incarceration. Some are making halfway houses and work-release programs a bigger part of the mix. More rehabilitation programs at earlier stages of the criminal justice system are advocated by some authorities.

But none of this goes to one of the most perplexing questions of our time: Why does crime, particularly violent crime, continue to escalate? The answer to that question, of course, holds the key to many things, including, quite possibly, prison overcrowding.

Meanwhile, our public officials must endeavor, with the support of the people, to try to find what works. We need to rethink our "corrections" systems and seek creative solutions - what works.

And maybe the federal judges should re-evaluate their roles in the process, too. It is not enough to simply say, "This many and no more," and then wash their hands of responsibility for the outcome. Their help is needed, too.

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