

OPINION

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Booze, Drugs and Prisons

California has just completed a \$5-billion building boom that tripled its number of prison cells, but still finds itself without enough space to house prisoners. State prisons are expected to reach maximum capacity by 2000, while county jails are so strained that 2.6 million arrest warrants went unserved last year because there would have been no place to put those arrested. Gov. Pete Wilson has proposed a \$1-billion bond measure to fund construction of four new state prisons. But rather than simply launching another building boom, California legislators should begin a serious effort to address what two new studies identify as the chief underlying cause of soaring incarceration rates: substance abuse.

Drug and alcohol abuse play a part in 80% of the crimes that land Americans in prison, concludes a new study by Columbia University. However, the study adds, substance abuse goes undetected and untreated in most prisons. If most of these people remained locked up for life, failure to treat their abuse would not threaten public safety. But according to a report last week by California's Little Hoover Commission, 110,000 of the 154,000 people imprisoned in California are released every year and 60% of them return to prison within two years, largely because of problems related to drugs and alcohol.

Fortunately, substance abuse detection is becoming a priority in Washington and Sacramento. President Clinton last week asked Congress to tie federal funding for state prisons to improvements in drug abuse detection, such as urine and blood tests. And earlier this month, Wilson proposed spending \$1.3 million to improve equipment and canine units for contraband detection and \$273,000 for conducting random drug and alcohol tests on prison employees. As Richard Stratton, founder and

publisher of "Prison Life" magazine, explains, "most drugs are brought in by prison guards" who find it an easy way to boost their average \$40,000 yearly earnings.

Despite his strides on substance detection, Wilson has failed to provide adequate funding for what should follow: treatment. An estimated 120,000 of the state's 154,000 inmates have substance abuse problems, but the state will only be able to provide substantial treatment for 3,000.

Some prisoners, of course, would have committed their crimes regardless of substance abuse. And many prisoners need far more than substance abuse treatment: The Little Hoover Commission sensibly recommends education and work programs to prepare felons for life on the outside, and better monitoring after release.

Ambitious anti-drug efforts will take time to launch. But legislators can start solving the problem now by providing more funding for substance abuse treatment than the \$31 million allocated for current programs. The Assembly should take up a current bill sponsored by Sen. Bill Lockyer (D-Hayward) that would phase in 8,000 new treatment slots over five years.

Short-term drug treatment programs are often ineffective. But liberal and conservative criminologists alike recognize the effectiveness of intensive prison and parole drug programs like those pioneered at San Diego's Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility. According to a federal study last year, only 16% of inmates who completed the San Diego program returned to custody within one year of their release, compared with a 65% return-to-custody rate for an untreated group.

Wilson's drug detection measures are fine, but legislators need to go beyond that, funding drug treatment as well, to slow the revolving doors of our state prisons.