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COLUMN ONE

A Return to the Goal of Reforming Inmates

■ Officials reconsider the discredited idea of rehabilitation as two out of three California parolees are back in prison within two years.

By MARK ARAX, Times Staff Writer

CORCORAN, Calif.--The white prison van pulled up to the train stop in Corcoran, in the shadow of the big grain silos, and out walked two young inmates just released from the state penitentiary down the block.

They were headed back home to Los Angeles, but there was one piece of business left to transact with the guard setting them free. They each put down their wrinkled grocery bag of worldly accumulations and reached out to grab an envelope with two \$100 bills tucked inside.

The wind blew one bill down the tracks and the tall inmate smiled nervously as he tried not to seem too anxious about picking it up. They had no words of wisdom about the toll of living inside America's deadliest prison or their chance for success on the outside. "I'm just trying to go home," said the shorter one, a barrio tattoo scrawled into his neck.

He cinched his belt tighter as the Amtrak train came to a slow halt. Then the guard shook their hands and aboard they climbed, crossing the thin divide between prisoner and parolee, between ward of the state and your next-door neighbor.

The same scene, more or less, plays out each day in prison towns up and down the state. Of the 160,000 inmates locked safely away in California's 33 penitentiaries, more than half will be getting out in the next two years. Their prospects--and by extension ours--are not bright. In almost every instance, studies show, the state is sending them home without the skills to succeed--often illiterate, hooked on drugs and lacking any education or job training to speak of.

Many are going straight from maximum-security cells and round-the-clock lock-downs to a world of liberty without any real

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preparation or transition, just the \$200 in "gate money." The chance of a parolee committing a new crime or violation in two years and crossing back over the line has been rising and is now more than two out of three, statistics show.

In an effort to slow this revolving door of crime and the budget-busting growth of prisons, the idea of rehabilitation is making a comeback of sorts, three decades after becoming a dirty word. Known these days by different aliases--life skills, job training, therapeutic drug treatment--the notion of equipping inmates for success beyond bars is finding acceptance again among penal experts and politicians of all stripes.

If the punishment pendulum hasn't quite moved to the middle, it has begun to quiver. For the first time in a generation, the state Legislature has significantly expanded inmate work and education programs, as well as in-prison drug treatment and community after care. The increased funding, though still slight, began in the Wilson administration and is projected to grow under Gov. Gray Davis. The shift comes in the wake of studies showing that inmate remedial programs do work.

"Nobody likes folks sitting in their cells with nothing to do, and right now we have too many inmates who aren't involved in any programs," said Cal Terhune, director of state corrections. "But we are making progress. In the past few years alone, our drug treatment beds have gone from 400 to almost 5,000.

"We're seeing a push from the Legislature and the administration to find some legitimate work training and educational programs that will cut down on the number of parolees committing new crimes."

The deprivations of California's high-tech prisons--the recent push to take away more and more basic privileges and just plain human contact--makes inmates dismal candidates for good citizenship, corrections officials, legislators and inmates agree.

Every few months, it seems, in San Luis Obispo one week and Rancho Cucamonga and Modesto the next week, another parolee is caught up in another heinous crime. And for every sensational headline, scores more never make the papers--drug offenders and petty thieves caught red-handed trying to feed their addictions and shipped back to prison to share cells with murderers and rapists.

A Consensus Among Liberals, Conservatives

California is hardly unique in churning out convicts whose only honed skill seems the ability to victimize again. Voices now urging a better balance between punishment and programs can be heard across the country. But because California boasts the nation's largest prison population and one of the highest recidivism rates, a consensus has begun to build among prison experts and top corrections officials past and present, liberal and conservative.

They say that the state's focus on ever more harsh

punishment--coupled with the absence of remedial programs--has served California poorly. In society's collective anger, they say, people seemed to have forgotten that they can't lock 'em up and throw away the key forever, at least not for the majority of convicts. At some point, sooner than later, they are ours again.

The choice is stark: a fast-growing prison system that will gobble up spending for education and other cherished programs or one that makes a better distinction between violent and nonviolent criminals and pays more than lip service to drug treatment, job training and education.

"To attack crime, we need apprehension, detention and prevention, and in recent years we've neglected prevention strategies," said state Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer. "We have two kinds of state convicts: the violent sociopath for whom no remedial effort will work and the screw-up who can be reached through programs. Unfortunately, we've failed to distinguish between the two."

But even as the Legislature and the Davis administration have dipped their feet in the waters of rehabilitation, some legislators want to make life harder for convicts. Believing that prison isn't punishment enough, a handful of Democrats and Republicans are trying to take away family visits and television.

The state prison guard union supports television as an important pacifier for inmates, but Assemblywoman Sally Havice (D-Cerritos) has introduced a bill to ban TV and overnight family visits. The bill, which is stuck in committee, states that such privileges send the wrong message to crime victims and their families.

"Prisoners are in prison to be punished," said Joseph Cruz, a legislative staffer who helped write the bill. Havice "also feels that TV isn't teaching these prisoners anything."

Many corrections experts such as Ray Procnier, a champion of the death penalty who directed California prisons for Gov. Ronald Reagan, see this as a serious miscalculation. Neglecting inmates is one thing, he said, fueling a pent-up rage is another.

"The politicians got no business making rules for prisons, that's the job of the warden and the director," said Procnier, who went on to head four other state prison systems during a 33-year career. "When they're watching TV or exercising at least they're not stabbing anyone. Hell, we need some carrots as well as sticks to keep them in line."

Whenever prison experts, victims and politicians debate crime and punishment, one of the assumptions is that rehabilitation has been tried--and it failed. But the history of rehabilitation in California shows that even in its heyday it wasn't practiced on a wide scale.

What passed for inmate jobs in the 1960s were mostly janitorial tasks: sweeping tiers, bringing hot water to cells, taking out kitchen garbage. Less than 15% of the inmate population received academic education or vocational training. A 1969 legislative report detailed machine shop equipment that was "old and obsolete," the teaching of

vocational skills that were "often antiquated" and prison jobs that offered "little more than idleness."

Jim Esten worked as a vocational instructor teaching offset printing at Soledad State Prison in 1973 and later watched the program's demise. He said rehabilitative efforts did fall short but that today's programs don't even pretend to reform inmates.

"Programs that utilize tools such as sheet metal and machine shop are now deemed a threat to the security and safety of the institution," Esten said.

He said the vocational training of the past not only taught a viable trade but helped ease racial tensions, with blacks, Latinos and whites working side-by-side.

"What was so amazing was seeing all these guys who would never think of eating together in the main dining hall suddenly sitting down next to each other in the vocational dining room," Esten said. "Work made them feel good about themselves and each other."

Jerry Enomoto, corrections director from 1975 to 1980, said rehabilitation became linked with "fuzzy-headed liberals" and that criminologists, some working from half-baked data, began debunking programs aimed at reducing recidivism. "Nothing works" became an easy catch phrase.

"Common sense just got lost in the turmoil of heinous crimes," said Enomoto, who oversaw a system of 35,000 inmates, a quarter the size of today's giant population. "In an environment of fear, it's hard for people to be anything but scared and hollering for longer terms and more prisons. Meaningful job and vocational training becomes hard to do."

The death of rehabilitation came in the late 1970s in the move from indeterminate to determinate sentencing and the adoption of a system that classified inmates not by their potential to reform but by the security risks they posed.

Overnight, as prisons such as Soledad took on a new role as keepers of violent and high-risk prisoners, the machine shop and other programs closed down because of security concerns.

At the time, the move from fluid to fixed sentencing was a rare coming together of conservative and liberal voices. Conservative supporters of fixed sentencing pointed to convicts who had been paroled too early only to kill or rape again. Liberals had their own poster boys for fixed sentencing, inmates with perfect prison records but who had remained behind bars at the whim of the parole board.

Corrections officials from that era say that determinate sentencing removed disparities. No longer was one inmate doing 25 years and another inmate five years for the same crime. Unfortunately, they said, it also removed judgment and flexibility from the process.

In the old system, inmates tried to impress the parole board with shiny records of work and education. In the shift to determinate sentencing, many of the incentives to achieve are gone. Whether an

inmate has proven himself, the clock typically dictates when he gets out. And no matter the crime, parole is three years of supervision by agents so overwhelmed with 80 or more cases that they often lose track of the parolee.

Today, even if a convict is so inclined, the holes in job training and education are so vast that little meaningful rehabilitation takes place, according to interviews with inmates and corrections officials and government studies.

The state's watchdog Little Hoover Commission concluded last year that politicians and the public have so demonized convicts and fixated on punishment that they have forgotten some basic math of public safety:

Half the inmates in state prison get out every two years; two of every three come back before completing parole. A quarter of those returning have committed new crimes, the remainder have violated some term of their parole.

Prison Population Is Soaring

The prison population, swelled by the three-strikes initiative and other mandatory sentencing laws, is already double its design capacity, the study found. If present trends continue, the number of men and women behind bars will grow from 160,000 to 218,000 in the next seven years.

"It was the fact that half the inmates get out and more than half quickly return, and the costs of those numbers, that really struck both Republicans and Democrats on the commission," said James Mayer, who wrote the report on the watchdog commission's yearlong study.

It is no wonder that parolees are failing, he said. Seventy-five percent have no job, 85% are substance abusers, 50% are illiterate.

Recidivism is practically built into a system in which less than 20% of inmates are in academic programs or vocational training, the study concluded. Prison industry jobs--producing furniture, milking cows, grinding optical lenses--employ just 4% of the population. By far the largest share of "programmed" inmates work as cooks, cleaners and groundskeepers.

Although the Department of Corrections measures every inmate for security risks, it fails to assess which programs could help them stay out of prison, the study found. The effort to help inmates make a transition back into the community is little more than a lecture about how to get a driver's license.

"I've been back and forth to prison five times, done 16 years and what the system calls 'job training' and 'continuing education' is a pathetic excuse," said Johnathan Wilkerson, 40, who was paroled from Corcoran this year after serving 12 years for robbery and attempted murder.

Inmates at High Desert State Prison in Susanville, for instance, say

that their desire to get job training has been frustrated by repeated 24-hour lock-downs and a teacher shortage. Some inmates have waited more than a year to get into a high school equivalency class. To fill the librarian slot, the prison recently brought over the plumbing instructor. That forced the plumbing class to shut down.

Gone, too, are the weight piles and the horseshoe pits and three sets of bleachers--all removed in the name of making the prison harsher. "When I want to read, I've got nowhere to sit because of the snow or the mud," one Susanville inmate wrote *The Times*. "So I just read walking in circles, as does everyone else."

The penal system doesn't have to churn out inmates destined to fail, prison reformers say. Rehabilitation, if staffed properly and matched with the right inmates, does change lives and proof can be found at the **R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego**.

In a corner of the medium-security facility, the **Amity drug treatment program has cut deeply into recidivism rates, according to the Little Hoover Commission**, the bipartisan agency that investigates state operations. Correctional staff were skeptical of the 200-bed therapeutic program based on the old Synanon model of group living and rigorous encounter sessions. But after several months, surprise drug tests showed drug addicts and gang leaders were staying clean even though drugs could be easily purchased through the prison underground.

A year after completing the program, 66% of participants had stayed out of prison, compared with only 34% of inmates not receiving treatment, studies showed. State officials cited the program's success as a major reason for opening an 1,800-bed drug treatment facility at Corcoran two years ago.

"If we can duplicate that success, the economic savings is huge," Lockyer said.

Some respected criminologists and sociologists continue to cast a wary eye at programs designed to change the behavior of convicts, arguing that the criminal lifestyle is often deeply ingrained. Whether nurture or nature, the bent toward crime is not easily deterred, they say.

Inmates who have succeeded on the outside say the public needs to understand that most convicts must be taught like children, and that prison is just about the worst environment to reform someone.

Renny Jones, who spent seven years in prison for arson, has parlayed his inmate clerking skills into a good job with AT & T in Los Angeles. Married and the father of two sons, he coaches basketball and teaches at his church.

But Jones, 40, said he never forgets that he is an ex-con, that he could slip up any time. "It's a daily battle. People have to understand that the skills needed to survive in prison are the very skills you have to give up on the outside."

"In prison, if someone walks by and brushes your leg, you just can't let it rest or the next guy walking by is going to pinch you somewhere

else. It's an environment where you just can't go in and do your time quietly. You have to answer every challenge, every single one. The first time you don't answer it, it will answer you," he said.

Felix Gonzales, 46, has been clean for six years after being imprisoned nearly half his life for drug crimes. The Bay Area resident said he owes his survival to a residential drug treatment program for parolees in San Francisco. The Milestones program slowly re-integrated him into society. He now works as a roofer and a substance abuse counselor.

"I was a maniac but most of all I lacked self-esteem," he said. "It took a lot of hard, hard work but I really enjoy my life today. Everything seems to be in great balance."


James Park, a former assistant warden at San Quentin, said society has to stop looking for a magic bullet. A good education program might save five out of 100 inmates and a counseling program might save another 10. "Everything can work but nothing works 100%," he said. "Five percent here and 10% there and pretty soon you've got some real numbers adding up."

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California's Revolving Prison Door

More than two-thirds of felons on parole return to prison within two years. Most returning convicts have violated parole terms and go back to prison for an average sentence of six months. But a quarter of returning parolees have committed a new crime and get a longer sentence.

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