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EDITORIAL

The California Prison Disaster

The mass imprisonment philosophy that has packed prisons and sent corrections costs through the roof around the country has hit especially hard in California, which has the largest prison population, the highest recidivism rate and a prison budget raging out of control.

According to a new federally backed study conducted at the University of California, Irvine, the state's corrections costs have grown by about 50 percent in less than a decade and now account for about 10 percent of state spending — nearly the same amount as higher education. The costs could rise substantially given that a federal lawsuit may require the state to spend \$8 billion to bring the prison system's woefully inadequate medical services up to constitutional standards.

The solution for California is to shrink its vastly overcrowded prison system. To do so, it would need to move away from mandatory sentencing laws that have proved to be disastrous across the country — locking up more people than protecting public safety requires.

In addition, the state also has perhaps the most counterproductive and ill-conceived parole system in the United States. More people are sent to prison in California by parole officers than by the courts. In addition, about 66 percent of California's parolees land back in prison after three years, compared with about 40 percent nationally. Four in 10 are sent back for technical violations like missed appointments or failed drug tests.

Later this year, the state is expected to begin testing a new system that redirects the lowest-risk drug addicts to treatment. But that will only work if the state and the counties dramatically expand treatment slots.

The heart of the problem is that California's parole system is simply too big. Most states keep dangerous people behind bars or reserve parole supervision for the

most serious offenders. California puts virtually everyone on parole, typically for three years.

Under this setup, about 80 percent of the parolees have fewer than two 15-minute meetings with a parole officer per month. That might be adequate for low-risk offenders, but it's clearly too little time for serious offenders who present a risk to public safety.

A good first step would be to place fewer people on parole. The second step would be to reserve the most intensive supervision for offenders who present the greatest risk.

State lawmakers, some of whom are fearful of being seen as soft on crime, have failed to make perfectly reasonable sentencing modifications and other changes that the prisons desperately need. Unless they muster some courage soon, Californians will find themselves swamped by prison costs and unable to afford just about anything else.