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Fewer People Behind Bars

The number of people locked up in Missouri's prisons is going down... just the opposite of what we're seeing on a national level. Why the drop? Well, it boils down to a decrease in what we call recidivism: repeat offenders. Programs in the sentencing and punishment phases are helping reduce the recidivism rate.

In 2005, Missouri started a new system of sentencing that would take into account the likelihood that the offender would commit another crime. That was the year the Missouri Sentencing Advisory Commission set guidelines to encourage courts to refer more offenders to 120-day in-prison shock and treatment programs. In addition, nonviolent offenders with little prior criminal histories have had their sentences reduced. The courts haven't been playing a guessing game of who would offend again and who would not. Probation officers are giving courts and attorneys analyses of the offenders' risk factors, strategies for supervising and managing offenders through community-based sanctions or prison-based programs, and recommended sentences for the offenders. When a prison sentence is recommended, the parole board's guidelines and practices for paroling offenders in that category are considered. Missouri is doing a better job of making room in the prison system for those who are most likely to re-offend and therefore the most dangerous.

It is important to stop here and make a distinction between violent offenders and non-violent offenders. Missouri is not looking for ways to let the bad guys out. For example, we've taken decisive action to stop sexual predators with the passage of Missouri's version of Jessica's Law... named for 9-year-old Jessica Lunsford, the Florida girl who was kidnapped and brutally killed by a convicted sex offender who had his prison sentence reduced. Our law includes a 30-year mandatory minimum sentence for certain first time offenders and mandatory life sentences if they repeat.

But we must also consider the fact that 97 percent of all offenders incarcerated will one day return to our communities. Missouri must find a balance between keeping dangerous offenders off our streets and preparing those who have paid their debt to society for re-entry into our communities.

When prisoners are in the corrections system, they're given opportunities to take parenting classes, get a GED, or get substance abuse treatment. Offenders can also search for and apply for jobs prior to being released.

In addition to the work of the state, dozens of faith-based organizations help the offenders succeed when returning to the community. The InterChange Freedom Initiative (IFI) is an exciting faith-based voluntary program the Department of Corrections has implemented to combat recidivism rates. It's shown great promise in other states and is used extensively in Brazil where recidivism rates are reportedly less than 5 percent.

In Missouri, we have seen the number of prisoners in our system drop by more than 800 in the last two years. That's more than 800 prisoners' daily costs of about \$41 each (more than \$15,000 per offender each year) that we don't have to spend housing and feeding them. Having served less time behind bars and better prepared for life after prison, 12 percent fewer former convicts are going back to jail, compared to recidivism rates before the Sentencing Advisory Commission came to being. This all adds up to a change in the trend from the 1990s when we were building more and more prisons to try to keep up with the growing population. Now, we're spending fewer tax dollars and returning more offenders back into society to be productive members... a goal we can all agree upon.

I believe that harsher sentences and aggressive drug enforcement have also contributed to the overall drop in crime in our state. We are constantly working to make sure that those who are most likely to re-offend are incarcerated for as long as possible. It is a difficult and imprecise task.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.