

Inmates released under new law Sentences trimmed for some offenders

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A new law aimed at reducing the state's inmate population took effect yesterday and had an immediate effect in San Diego County, where about 260 nonviolent offenders were released.

The convicts here — all doing time for offenses such as drug possession or petty theft — were let go under a provision that forces local officials to retroactively recalculate how they shorten sentences for good behavior and other credits.

Local law enforcement and court officials reviewed the files of 1,600 inmates, including those in county jails, to determine who should get out early, said Lisa Rodriguez, a deputy district attorney. Those convicted of serious, violent or sex crimes aren't eligible for the accelerated credits, Rodriguez said.

Statewide, corrections officials launched their plan to reduce the prison population by 6,500 inmates and save the state more than \$100 million over the next year. They said some of the revamped program's elements will cut down on recidivism and allow parole agents to focus attention on more dangerous former convicts.

"It really is a win-win situation," said Matthew Cate, California's secretary of corrections, who called the measure "a landmark achievement."

Some police and crime-victim groups fear the law will threaten public safety, partly by making it harder for officers to keep tabs on felons.

"In the short term, we'll save money. But in the long run, if these guys commit more crimes, who's going to pay for it?" said Ernie Carrillo, president of the Deputy Sheriffs' Association of San Diego County.

Early Release

- California's inmate population will be reduced by 6,500 this year to comply with a new law. It is projected to drop by 40,000 ultimately.
- San Diego County jails gave early release to about 260 inmates yesterday as part of the revised guidelines. These are low-level criminals such as shoplifters and drug users.
- Prisoners who committed crimes against children will not be considered.
- Also disqualified are inmates jailed for serious or violent crimes, including burglaries, robberies and sexual assault.

California is under a federal court order to cut the number of inmates by 40,000 — from about 168,000 now — over several years to ease overcrowding and improve health care in the state's 33 prisons.

Cate said the initial reduction of 6,500 inmates will happen gradually in two ways this year.

The first involves about 5,000 “low risk” prisoners who will no longer be on three years of supervised parole after they are released. They can still be searched by police, but they won't face technical violations — a failed drug test, for example — that often send parolees back to prison for several months at a time.

Those short-term sentences contribute to California's recidivism rate of roughly 70 percent, among the highest in the nation.

“About 9,000 inmates who have served their sentences leave the prisons every month,” Cate said. “What this parole reform says is, if you commit a new crime you will go back, but not for technical violations.”

Cate said increasing the number of inmates on “nonrevocable parole” also will give parole agents more time to deal with riskier ex-convicts, and that should reduce overall crime. The average caseload for each agent will drop from 70 parolees to 48, he said.

“This represents a major change in the way we do business,” Cate said.

An additional 1,500 inmates are expected to trim their sentences by reaching certain educational, work-training and other rehabilitation milestones. Each achievement can shave up to six weeks per year off their terms.

Cate said studies show these programs lower crime rates.

Critics are doubtful.

Crime Victims United and similar groups said they recognize the need to ease prison overcrowding and cut costs, but not at the expense of public safety.

They gathered yesterday in Sacramento with two Assembly members — Ted Lieu, D-Torrance, and Alyson Huber, D-Eldorado Hills — to express their concerns. The lawmakers introduced a bill that would allow law enforcement agencies to object before an inmate is released into nonrevocable parole status.

Besides the inmates released early from San Diego County jails yesterday, 80 or so who qualified under the new law were turned over to other authorities for parole or immigration violations.

Before yesterday's change, inmates here received two days of good-time credit for every four days they spent in custody — a one-third reduction in their sentences.

Now, to bring the county in line with what the state is awarding, inmates will receive two days of credit for every two days served, a 50 percent reduction.