

Commentary

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Open and Shut Case: Prison Space Needed

Buried among recommendations in Gov. Edgar's task force report on prison overcrowding was what should be the most pressing need: more prison space.

Violent crime in Illinois increased 20 percent between 1989 and 1991. Last year, two-thirds of the state's prisoners had been convicted of violent crime, compared with less than 50 percent in 1977. It's clear Illinois needs another maximum-security facility.

The task force, led by former U.S. Attorney Anton R. Valukas, proposed construction of a 500-bed "super-maximum" prison for the most hardened and violent criminals. But we're troubled that most of task force recommendations were aimed at finding ways to keep out additional criminals.

With crime on the increase, and tough-talking lawmakers too wimpish to raise taxes to build and operate new prisons, it would be unfortunate if the Valukas report is used to do what is not in the public interest: keep violent criminals out of jails.

The task force presented 26 specific recommendations it said would curb the increase in prison population by more than 7,000 in the next four years. Overcrowding would be relieved by giving inmates more time off for good behavior, shifting more to boot-camp facilities and sending others home early with electronic monitoring devices.

Overcrowding would be further relieved by adding more drug treatment and job training programs, which would reduce the recidivism rate that's now at 46 percent.

Without a cohesive plan, Valukas warns, the state's prisons—which already exceed capacity even with doubling in cells—will run out of space for new inmates as early as June, 1994.

It's easy to follow this scenario to its inevitable conclusion: Offenders will have to be released early to make room for the ever increasing numbers going in. That revolving door has already made a mockery of the criminal justice system.



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