

ILLINOIS SUPERMAX – NOT A SOLUTION!

ISN'T IT TIME TO FUND HUMAN NEEDS -- NOT PRISON?

In June, Governor Edgar publicly endorsed the proposal of his Task Force on Crime and Corrections that Illinois construct a \$60 million "Super-Max" prison. The Task Force has further recommended the construction of over 3,000 more new prison cells. These proposals come in the face of massive budget cuts in Illinois social programs and welfare services, a crisis in funding for public education, the elimination of General Assistance, and soaring infant mortality and homelessness rates. We feel that the true construction cost for this single "Super-Max" prison will be over \$100 million.

Can we really afford another prison? The state of Illinois has just completed a massive prison construction program, building 15 new prisons and doubling the state's prison population over the last 15 years. However, it must be clear by now that more prisons is not the solution. While Chicago can barely afford to spend \$5,000 per child on education, the State willing to spend over \$40,000 per prisoner a year for incarceration in a Super-Max prison.

What is a Super-Max prison? Conditions in these "Super-Max", more accurately called "Control Unit" prisons, are simply horrendous. Prisoners are kept in their cells 23 hours a day, subjected to extreme sensory deprivation and lack all social, educational, and rehabilitation programs. These conditions result in extreme psychological and physical deterioration. In 1991, Indiana opened a Super-Max prison and it has quickly drawn the criticism of Amnesty International. Amnesty has already written two letters of condemnation to the Indiana Department of Corrections, warning that the conditions there violate the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Super-Max Prisons Don't Work. Proponents say that Edgar's 500 bed "Super-Max" prison will get rid of the "baddest of the bad." However, last year "there were 45,839 disciplinary reports written" in Illinois prisons, and "on any given day more than 900 prisoners are in segregation." Thus, it should be clear that the problem is much deeper than 500 "bad apples." Moreover, evidence shows that inmates are often arbitrarily assigned to Super-Max prisons; these are often "politically active" inmates, jailhouse lawyers, political prisoners, or inmates who file too many grievances or lawsuits demanding their rights.

These is absolutely no evidence from any other state that Super-Max prisons succeed. I.e. there is absolutely no evidence that the Super-Max prisons deter crime or create safer prison systems. The Governor's Task Force itself acknowledged this lack of total evidence in its original report. Should the state of Illinois commit over \$100 million to a project which will most likely lead to expensive lawsuits, condemnations by human rights organizations, and *increased violence* once those incarcerated in these inhumane, degrading, and dehumanizing conditions are eventually released?

The Governor's Task Force itself has admitted that building more prisons is not the solution. The Illinois prison system was designed to hold about 22,000 inmates; it now houses over 33,000. Illinois has the fastest growing incarceration rate in the nation. By July 1994 the prison system will have reached its capacity ceiling of 36,000. This creates an explosive situation. Meanwhile, increased incarceration has **not solved our problems**. The Governor's original mandate was for the Task Force to "study alternatives to incarceration" and to "identify solutions . . . in a manner the taxpayers of Illinois can afford." Many of the Task Force's recommendations to ease overcrowding are positive. For example, the Task Force has proposed giving inmates more opportunities to earn "good time," increased spending on community-based programs, increased funds for drug and rehabilitation programs, and modifying the state's mandatory minimum sentencing laws. These are positive steps. However, in order for state legislator's not to appear "soft on crime", the Task Force has included a Super-Max prison as part of a "package deal". Thus, instead of educating citizens to the fact that building more prisons is not the solution, state legislators can continue to exploit the public's prejudices and fears.

Racism in Imprisonment. One has to be seriously concerned with the racist nature of incarceration, and the increasing numbers of young African-American and Latino males who are being imprisoned. In Illinois, where African-Americans are 15% of the total population, they are 63% of the total prison population. In other words, out of a prison population of 32,000 people, about 21,000 are African-American and another 5,000 are Hispanic. What does this suggest about possible racial bias in imprisonment in our state?

Who are we? The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown has been in existence for nearly ten years. We began as a very small group opposed to the "lockdown" situation and human rights abuses at Marion Federal Penitentiary in Southern Illinois. Marion was the first Super-Max/Control Unit prison in the U.S. We know that opposition to prison expansion and/or support for the human rights of prisoners has never been a popular cause. We hope that you will take the time to carefully consider the points we have raised. If you would like more information or would like to get involved, please mail:

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