

# How Experts Want To Change Prisons

## Men Who Shouldn't Be There

Today, Charles Howe tells what some of those who have been working on the California prison problem have concluded. It's part of a three-month investigation of prison life by Howe and Tim Findley.

By Charles Howe

Throughout California a number of dedicated men and women in and out of the Department of Corrections are quietly working to reduce the state's prison population by at least half.

Here are some of their conclusions:

- The amount of time a man serves behind bars has no relation to whether or not he will fail in the streets and be returned to prison.

- Men convicted of property crimes — as opposed to violent crimes — never should be sent to prison.

- Inmates are the unwilling recipients

of all the programs the state has put together under the aegis of "rehabilitation." What is needed, instead, is to involve inmates in their own therapy, as equals.

- San Quentin, Folsom, Soledad and Vacaville ought to be demolished. In their places should be constructed smaller institutions, ideally none of them with room for more than 600 inmates.

- The threat of punishment does not deter the men who go to prison; it never has and it never will.

- Society has no clear idea what it wants of men it labels "criminals." On one hand, society demands punishment and on the other it asks that these men be "rehabilitated." The two concepts, in tandem, are incompatible.

- Substantial reforms within the prison system must come from the outside: from dedicated groups of civilians who will provide



# How Experts Look at Prison Reform

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everything from jobs to supportive counselling. Until then, the prison system will continue relatively unchanged.

A high official in the Department of Corrections said this of today's prison population:

"We have reached the point where we are locking up, mainly, people on the lowest end of the social structure: the poor and the disadvantaged, and the racial minorities.

"I have no idea how many of these inmates passed all the way through the refining processes of law enforcement: juvenile hall, reform school, the Youth Authority and finally prison.

"But I would guess fully three-quarters of these men would not be here if they had had the same opportunities out on the streets that you and I had."

## OPPORTUNITIES

A psychologist who has spent most of his life working with offenders agrees. It was his pioneering concept — "New Careers," conceived more than 10 years ago — that the state is now beginning to examine seriously.

J. Douglas Grant, who took 18 felons and retrained the majority of them to succeed on the outside in jobs paying up to \$15,000 yearly, said this:

"The best way to rehabilitate offenders is to help change the structure of opportunities on the outside.

And this consists of creating jobs with real dignity."

Using inmates and working with them on a peer-group basis, Grant was able to convince them that while they could retain their individuality — as opposed to the state's mandate of imposing upper-middle class values on prisoners — there were opportunities for success on the outside.

## VIOLENCE

Hans Toch, a colleague of Grant's, went further in a study of violence. In his book — "Violent Men" — Toch makes a strong case for using violent inmates to audit other violent inmates.

Here, Toch maintains, men with a history of violence who have come to understand why they explode into

rage are the best equipped to deal with their own brethren.

Grant, Toch and others also maintain that society has no clear idea as regards what it wants from prisons and inmates.

Sentences are created by the legislature — usually by men who have never been inside a prison — and only rarely is expert advice sought before the penalty for, say, possession of marijuana is upgraded.

## CENTERS

What has to be done, critics maintain, is to stop locking up men who present no immediate threat to the community — in this case, half of the 24,000 men behind bars in California

In lieu of prisons for these

men, critics say, there should be a cluster of community correctional centers.

Here, in a sheltered environment, non-violent offenders would be treated in the same area they have lived and worked in.

These men, utilized in a variety of private or community services, could pay their own way. Now, they cost the state \$3000 apiece annually.

The petty burglar or the car thief who is frequently a management problem in prison could, with appropriate therapy, take his place in society.

"When society gets off the punishment kick," an officer told us, "it will decide that the only men who should be locked up are those who are dangerous

The rest of them — guys

committing property crimes — aren't going to get much benefit out of the joints. I mean, how do you rehabilitate a man while you're punishing him?"

## PATTERNS

Toch, whose studies of violent men have included the behavior of both policemen and prisoners, maintains that patterns of violence in individual behavior can almost be coded, like a computer read-out.

Additional studies of violent behavior might provide a clue as to how to prevent it. But prison, Toch says, is the last place in the world to prevent violence.

"Violence feeds on low self-esteem and self-doubt," Toch writes, "and prison unhumans and dehumanizes; violence rests on exploitation

and exploitiveness, and prison is a power-centered jungle."

## DEDICATION

Currently, the state is spending more than \$100 million annually running California's sprawling prison system.

Within this system The Chronicle found some tremendously dedicated men and women: officers who dug into their own pockets to buy furniture for a conjugal visiting apartment at California Rehabilitation Center.

## DOOMED

Therapists, wardens, administrators and rank-and-file employees at all levels, clearly as vexed at the problem of why men keep coming back to prison as its society, work incredibly long hours as they pursue what

ever it takes to "rehabilitate" an inmate.

Their efforts, critics say, are largely doomed to failure as long as the men they work with live in a controlled environment, where to identify with society almost automatically labels a man a snitch or an informer.

"Life in these institutions reinforces so-called criminal behavior," one correctional official admitted.

"And if we must lock men up, do it on a selective basis and lock up small number of men in smaller institutions."

One inmate, close to tears as he began his fourth term in the penitentiary, summed it up this way:

"God help me, it isn't so bad in here that I'm afraid of it and it isn't so good out there that I can make it alone."