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Beginning the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday beginning at the former headquarters of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Co.

Exclusive: Justice changing how inmate risk is assessed

By Michael Balsamo

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Justice Department is changing the system it uses to assess whether an inmate is likely to commit crimes after being released from prison, aiming to ensure the process is fairer and more effective. The impetus for the change is a criminal justice overhaul signed into law in late 2018.

Police release video of stop that prompted investigation

RALEIGH (AP) - A North Carolina police department has released body-camera video of a traffic stop that prompted a use-of-force investigation.

Raleigh police released video on Jan. 17 that showed two officers grabbing, punching and kneeling a man who was shown ignoring their orders, The News & Observer reported. Footage shot by a passenger in the car was widely shared online earlier in the week.

Police previously said the suspect, Brailly Andres Batista-Concepcion, 22, was arrested Tuesday as officers stopped him in connection with three hit-and-run crashes earlier that day. One 911 caller noted that a driver hit her car, then backed up and attempted to hit her again, according to calls obtained by news outlets. Another caller reported being hit by a similar car hit twice before taking off. The suspect was also accused of hitting a pole.

An officer pulled over a car matching the description and driving erratically, a police news release said. The driver, Batista, appeared to be impaired while transporting three passengers, police noted.

He was charged with several misdemeanors, including hit and run, possession of marijuana and resisting arrest. "They hit me so bad I forgot everything," he told the newspaper earlier in the week.

The president of the Raleigh chapter of the NAACP said the suspect's choices contributed to the confrontation but that all parties involved should have behaved differently, TV station WTVD reported.

"When given a direction by an officer, please follow it," Police Chief Cassandra Deck-Brown said at a news conference. "Compliance and cooperation is so important during these types of situations."

The federal Bureau of Prisons has already assessed nearly all the 175,269 inmates in federal custody to identify programs they may need to help reduce the risk of recidivism. But the Justice Department plans to rescreen all those inmates under new guidelines that officials say place a stronger emphasis on accurately measuring an inmate's change behind bars and are intended to reduce potential bias.

Although all the inmates will be rescreened, officials do not expect to see major changes in the risk levels of inmates. Nonetheless, officials believe the change is an important step to ensure a fairer and more transparent process.

The assessments are part of the First Step Act, which President Donald Trump has promoted as a rare bipartisan effort to address concerns that too many Americans were imprisoned for nonviolent crimes as a result of the drug war. The law gives judges more discretion when sentencing some drug offenders, eases mandatory minimum sentences and encourages inmates to participate in programs designed to reduce their risk of reoffending, with credits that can be used to gain an earlier release.

Under the law, inmates are screened using the risk tool released in July and designed to predict the likelihood that inmates may commit other offenses or violent crimes. The assessment examined a number of factors, including an inmate's age and crime, as well as whether an inmate participated in education or drug treatment programs.

But months later, following feedback from advocates and other groups, the Justice Department is redesigning the tool to change certain measures that could add a racial bias. Specifically, the assessment will no longer look at an inmate's age when that inmate was first arrested or whether the inmate was given the ability to turn himself in at a prison.

Officials also looked into whether they should remove a category examining whether an inmate had previously violated the terms of supervised release. But they found that statistics showed white defendants were actually sent back to prison more often than African American and Hispanic offenders, contrary to concerns from critics.

The department's announcement includes the release of a 41-page report. The Bureau of Prisons is providing the results of the assessments to inmates, which include which prison programs officials believe they should participate in based on their needs.

Federal officials will begin to track the number of inmates put on wait lists at federal prisons for programs that range from drug treatment to culinary arts, auto repair and working in prison industries making clothes, furniture and electronics, a Justice Department official told The Associated Press. Officials will investigate whether there is

enough classroom space at federal correctional facilities, some of which were built many years ago, the official said.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss the plans before they were officially announced.

"Beginning today, inmates will have even greater incentive to participate in evidence-based programs that prepare them for productive lives after incarceration," Attorney General William Barr said in a statement. "This is what Congress intended with this bipartisan bill."

So far, the department released 124 inmates under the compassionate release program in 2019, compared with 34 in 2018. Also, 379 inmates have qualified for home confinement under a program that allows some elderly and terminally ill offenders to be transitioned to the less-restrictive sentence.

Nearly 15,000 inmates are enrolled in the Bureau of Prison's residential drug treatment program and 44,000 others are involved in other drug programs in federal prisons across the U.S.

More than 3,100 federal inmates were released in July by the Bureau of Prisons under the First Step Act and more than 2,400 others have qualified for reduced sentences under a separate provision of the law that allows some prisoners locked up for crack cocaine charges to ask for sentencing reduction.

N Carolina county adds historical markers for black heroes

WILSON (AP) - Wilson County plans to add four new historical markers this year to commemorate African-American heroes, including a 1946 effort to organize tobacco workers.

Called Operation Dixie, the unionization effort was led by black women demanding better working conditions in the tobacco industry. "They led a walk-out, and this was particularly significant because they were minority women leading this walkout, and it really started a movement," B. Perry Morrison, Jr., representing the Wilson County Historical Association, told members of the Wilson tourism board.

The state unveiled a historical marker in Rocky Mount in 2011. The local chapter of the Tobacco Workers International Union formed in Wilson in 1946.

Other markers to be unveiled in Wilson this year will honor the Wilson Normal and Industrial Institute, Dr. Frank S. Hargrave, and Charles H. Darden, the Wilson Times reported.

The marker for Hargrave describes him as the founder of Mercy Hospital, which treated African Americans in an era when even hospitals were segregated by race. In 1914, he was elected president of the National Medical Association, which was the African American equivalent of the American Medical Association.

Darden's marker says he established the first African American funeral business in Wilson in 1875.

The Wilson Normal and Industrial Institute opened after African Americans boycotted public schools to protest teacher Mary Euell being slapped by the county school superintendent. It operated from about 1918 to 1928.

"They are very significant parts of our history, and it will be exciting to commemorate them," Morrison said.



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