

The Daily Tar Heel

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IN DEPTH

Packed prisons release inmates early

By GLENN O'NEAL
 Assistant State and National Editor

Many inmates in North Carolina prisons are finding their prison sentences becoming increasingly shorter due to severe overcrowding.

The state prison population reached an all-time record this past Saturday of 18,233 inmates, surpassing the record of 18,222 set the day before, said David Guth, special assistant to the secretary of the Department of Corrections.

The previous record was set in February 1987 when the prison population grew to 18,215 inmates, Guth said in a telephone interview Tuesday.

In an effort to keep prison population levels under control, the General Assembly passed legislation on March 6 that raised the cap on statewide prison population from 18,000 to 18,525.

When the prison population reaches 98 percent of the cap — 18,155 — and stays above that level for 15 consecutive days, the Parole Commission has to reduce the prison population to 17,969 within 90 days, Guth said.

Bill Poston, spokesman for the Department of Corrections, said the prisoner level on Wednesday morning was 18,211, the fifth consecutive day the level had been over 18,155.

Guth said more prisoners were being released on parole earlier than before as a result of the overcrowding. In 1986, before the state imposed a voluntary cap of 18,000, the average felon served 40 percent of his sentence while the average minor offender served 36 percent of his sentence, he said. Currently, inmates serve 29 percent of felony sentences and 14 percent of misdemeanor sentences.

Analysis

When the state needs to reduce the prison population, the parole eligibility of the prisoners is advanced six to nine months, except for prisoners with no parole eligibility, Guth said.

Certain offenders are also excluded from early release: drug traffickers, sexual offenders, criminals convicted of kidnapping or abduction, persons convicted of driving while impaired (DWI) or DWI-related offenses and persons convicted of first and second degree murder, he said.

Earlier this year Governor Jim Martin announced a Prison and Punishment Initiative designed to handle the overcrowding problem, said David Prather, spokesman for the governor.

Gov. Martin's plan calls for an increase in alternative punishment programs such as intensive probation and electronic house arrest, Prather said. The initiative also calls for a \$490 million bond referendum to go before the voters in November that would create an additional 9,500 spaces for

prisoners.

The governor is also in favor of a state constitutional amendment that would allow judges to force criminals to accept alternative punishment programs, he said. The convicted criminal now has a choice between a prison sentence or alternative punishment, such as a six-month electronic house arrest with a \$10,000 fine.

"Crafty criminals are seeing that it is easier to go to prison," Prather said. "You go back to the street quicker by taking the prison term rather than the alternative punishment." He added that the criminal can also avoid being fined by taking the prison sentence.

Guth said the early release of prisoners was the primary force behind Gov. Martin's initiative. The governor does not want to see a further erosion of the time prisoners spend in prison, he said.

State Rep. Anne Barnes, D-Orange, co-chair of a special joint legislative committee on prisons, said Wednesday the committee had finished an initial proposal to address problems facing the state criminal justice system. The committee's goal is a better

definition of what the state wants to accomplish with its criminal justice system, Barnes said.

The committee has made a recommendation to expand electronic house arrest statewide by an additional 5,000 slots and to expand intensive probation by an additional 3,200 slots, she said.

The committee has also recommended the construction of 3,274 new prison spaces between now and July 1, 1992, Barnes said. The committee has recommended raising the cap levels as the new spaces are made available.

Barnes said committee members would like to see the establishment of a state grant fund that would provide matching funds to local governments to build more courthouse jail annexes.

The committee has recommended establishing a Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission composed of representatives of state and local government leaders and members of the private sector, she said. The commission would evaluate sentencing laws and corrections policies to determine what changes are needed and what impact those changes will have.

Campus Calendar

1991 Senior Calendar
 Class of 1991: Marshal applications are now available at the Union desk and are due by 5 p.m. Friday, April 6. No experience needed! Pete and Chris will hold office hours in the Pi every Thursday from 12:30 p.m. to 2 p.m. Please come by and meet us.

THURSDAY
 10 a.m.: The UNC Young Democrats announce that the Orange County Board of Elections will hold a voter registration clinic in the lobby of the Union until 3 p.m. Democrats, Republicans and independents may register to vote.
 11 a.m.: The Peer Advising Program reminds undergraduates that they can get help with pre-registration from seniors who remember today until 2 p.m. in Suite B of the Union, Room 216. A project of the Senior Class of 1990.
 Noon: UNC Child Care Committee presents "Raising America's Children: A Preview of the PBS Television Series" with Debbie Cryer of the Child Development Center in 205 Union. Call 962-1483 for more info.
 2 p.m.: The Institute for Research in Social Science will hold "SAS Mainframe, Session 6" with Jose Sandoval in O2 Manning. Call 962-0509 for more info.
 3:30 p.m.: The Dept. of English presents C.K. Williams, winner of the 1987 National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, who will read from his work in Donovan Lounge of Greenlaw Hall. Co-sponsored by the Creative Writing Program and the Graduate English Club.
 4 p.m.: IRSS will hold "SPSSx, Session 6" with Jose Sandoval in O2 Manning. Call 962-0509 for more info.
 Project Literacy will have a general meeting in the Y lounge!
 5 p.m.: 1990 Carolina Symposium presents "Taking Responsibility for Birth Damaged Babies: New Ethical Issues from Advanced Technology" with Carol Heimer of Northwestern in 210 Gardner. Call 962-8313 for more info.
 6 p.m.: The Asian Students Association will have its weekly meeting in 210 Union. We will be discussing the upcoming dance. Please come. All students are invited to attend.
 University Counseling Center's Brothers discussion group for and about black male students at UNC will meet in Ehringhaus dorm's first-floor lounge.

Undergraduates, graduate students and newcomers are all welcome.
 The Presbyterian Campus Ministry will have an undergraduate dinner at the Presbyterian Student Center, 110 Henderson St.
 The Marine Action Committee of SEAC will meet downstairs in the Campus Y. Bring your balloon petitions. We will be discussing upcoming events and activities, and all interested individuals are welcome.
 7 p.m.: The Office of NC Fellows/Leadership Development presents "Women in Leadership: Finding a Voice (Part II)" and "Gender Issues in Communication" in 103 Bingham. Call Carol Binzer at 966-4041 for more info.
 The Writing Center will be offering a workshop

in writing essays about novels in 317 Greenlaw until 8 p.m.
 The UNC Popular Culture Study Group will hold its first meeting tonight in the Union South Gallery Meeting Room.
 8 p.m.: 1990 Carolina Symposium presents "U.S. Military Procurement Policies" with John Tepper Martin of the Council on Economic Priorities in 101 Greenlaw. Call 962-8313 for more info.
 The Earth Day Committee of SEAC will meet in the Y Conference Room. Come one, come all — April 22 is quickly approaching, and we need you!
 11 p.m.: WXYC FM 89.3 will play the new album from The Silos - The Silos - in its entirety with no interruptions.

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