

California inmate release plan begins

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The state's controversial plan to reduce its prison population by 6,500 inmates over the next year begins today, with victims and law enforcement groups once again warning it will increase crime.

"We are concerned for the public's safety," said Christine Ward, director of the Crime Victims Action Alliance in Sacramento.

"We understand that this is a move by the Legislature to help relieve prison overcrowding and save money in the budget. But we're very disappointed that public safety seems to have taken a back seat to other issues."

The idea, which opponents label an "early-release" plan, was hammered out last year during contentious budget talks.

The plan calls for inmates deemed low-risk offenders to earn credits on their prison sentences by completing rehabilitation and education programs.

In addition, offenders deemed low-risk would not be subject to parole supervision upon release from prison, meaning they would be less likely to be returned to prison for minor parole violations.

Corrections officials say the effort will result in a gradual release of low-level offenders over the course of the year rather than a mass exodus today.

Corrections director Matthew Cate has called the plan a "landmark achievement" in increasing public safety because it calls for parole agents to focus on higher risk parolees and cuts their average workloads from 70 parolees to 48.

Under the plan, convicts not subject to parole supervision still will be subject to law enforcement searches. Opponents say that is meaningless in practice.

"The one condition imposed on the released inmates, that they may be searched without a warrant, is a pretense that there are at least some limitations and oversight in place," Paul M. Weber, president of the Los Angeles Police Protective League, said in a statement issued last week.

"However, since local law enforcement doesn't even know who these inmates are, there is no substance to the search condition."

The administration has said prison officials will assess inmates to determine who can be deemed low-risk. The process of reviewing the files of more than 20,000 inmates could take four months, corrections spokesman Oscar Hidalgo said Friday.

"We think ultimately this will allow our agents to keep their eye on more serious individuals," Hidalgo said. "You start changing your prison population to the people who need to be in there rather than just rotating people in for four months at a time."

The state faces a court edict to reduce its prison population by roughly 40,000 in coming years.

Law enforcement officials said they understand the inmate release will be gradual but expressed frustration at the notion of offenders returning to their communities – without supervision – at the same time budgets are being slashed and officers are getting laid off.

"A lot of it depends on what prisoners they send back," said Yolo County Sheriff Ed Prieto. "I understand they're low-level felons, but they're still felons."

Sacramento County Sheriff John McGinness said the result will be increased costs for local jails and courts.

"We're on the verge of a real crisis in criminal justice in California," he said.