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## Inmates Among Us

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With no new prisons opening since the mid-1990s, Connecticut has funneled an increasing number of inmates - mostly nonviolent - into the community to finish their prison sentences.

The number of inmates in these programs - which monitor and restrict their behavior in halfway houses or in their own homes - has nearly doubled over the past 10 years, nearing levels not seen since the early 1990s.

In the first seven of those years, the population of inmates locked up in prisons also increased, but for the past three years it has declined.

Community release programs, proponents say, give inmates the best chance at being successful when they are released. But the horrifying slayings of a mother and two daughters in Cheshire last month - which police say were committed by two parolees who met when they lived in a halfway house - have ignited a debate about the effectiveness of the programs.

"How do we want to deal with these guys?" said Rep. Michael Lawlor, D-East Haven, a co-chairman of



the legislature's judiciary committee, summing up the quandary the state faces in handling a swollen inmate population. "Some people say let's put them all in jail. OK, fine, but that means dramatically increasing taxes or shutting down a bunch of colleges."

"We can either open the prison door and push them out with a suit of new clothes and a check for \$50 or do this," Lawlor added, referring to community release programs.

While several states including Maine have moved to abolish parole, Connecticut has for the past 15 years moved in the opposite direction. Parole has spiked, with the grant rate reaching a peak of 93 percent in May.

"What we're hearing as a result of the Cheshire murders, some people are wondering whether the parole board was releasing people because the prisons are overcrowded," said state Senate Minority Leader John McKinney, a Republican. "It's a question we need to answer."

Gov. M. Jodi Rell ordered a review of the parole system after Joshua Komisarjevsky and Stephen Hayes were arrested in connection with the Cheshire killings..

In 2006, nearly 5,000 community release inmates lived among us and worked next to us - at McDonald's and the local garage.

Some stayed at halfway houses under intense supervision, allowed to leave only for work; others live on their own in the community with a sponsor.

All of the inmates - whether participants in the state's halfway house, parole, re-entry furlough or transitional supervision programs - are supervised by parole officers. Most of those released are drug offenders.

The state hasn't haphazardly sent these inmates into the community, Lawlor said, but instead has tried to find a way to ensure that the most violent offenders are locked up the longest, and that "nonviolent offenders are punished without tying up valuable cells."

And few would disagree that certain nonviolent inmates can be sent into the community to be rehabilitated.

Eligible nonviolent inmates can win release into a community program as early as the halfway point of their sentences. Violent offenders face tougher standards and cannot be released until they serve 85 percent of their sentences.

Parole is granted by the Board of Pardons and Paroles, a division of the Department of Correction.

Halfway house, transitional supervision and re-entry furlough placements are controlled by wardens in individual facilities, and an inmate can be released into one of these programs anywhere from 18 months to 30 days before the end of his or her sentence.

In 2004, with a goal of easing prison overcrowding, the legislature passed a law to make it easier for nonviolent offenders to get parole. Nonviolent offenders are eligible for release after serving 50 percent of their sentences; they are automatically given a second parole hearing after serving 75 percent of their sentences.

The intent is to give inmates an incentive to participate in rehabilitative programs in between the two

hearings, presuming they will try to win release by the time the second hearing rolls around.

The resulting increase in parole grant rates can be attributed to the 2004 law and to the philosophy of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, said Robert Farr, the panel's chairman since March 2007.

"If somebody has a sentence with no supervision, and if we deny them parole, that means that individual gets out and we don't even have a forwarding address," said Farr, a former veteran state legislator.

"They'll be out selling drugs on the streets the next day or they'll be breaking into homes to get money for drugs. You know certain individuals without some kind of supervision are likely to re-offend.

"So what we try to do," Farr said, "instead of just denying and maxing them out to the complete term, normally we will give someone some kind of supervision on the way out, so we can help them find housing, a job, in the hopes that person is going to stay stable and not re-offend again and come back in."

Department of Correction Commissioner Theresa Lantz, who points to a recently released study of Connecticut inmates that showed that men like Komisarjevsky and Hayes - parolees and graduates of halfway house programs - were among the minority of inmates released in 2000 who were re-convicted within three years.

The re-conviction rate for inmates released straight from prison was 47 percent, but only 24 percent for inmates on furlough or in halfway houses and 27 percent for inmates who ended their sentence on parole instead of in prison, according to the study, released in March by the Connecticut Statistical Analysis Center at Central Connecticut State University.

National studies have shown the re-conviction rate to be roughly 47 percent for all inmates released from prison.

"We're in the people recovery business," Lantz said in an interview weeks before the Cheshire killings. Lantz has increased the number of beds for prison release programs, including community supervision and substance abuse treatment beds, by 75 percent.

"It's a waste of humanity if we're locking people up who don't need to be locked up," she said.

Debbie Yanzo, a 48-year-old former addict, said that living at a tidy three-story halfway house on Stillman Street in Hartford saved her life.

Yanzo has been in and out of jail and prison on larceny, theft and forgery charges since at least 1989, according to DOC records. For the first time in her life, she said, she feels that she can stay clean and make a go of it when she's officially released from prison this fall.

She arrived at the halfway house in January, "a scared person in a shell," having never really dealt with abuse she suffered as a child at the hands of her mother, she says. On her first day at Hartford House she begged to be taken back to jail.

But she soon became the inmate representative of her halfway house and a manager at the McDonald's where she works and built up a savings account with enough money to make a deposit on an apartment. "You can make it if you really work hard," Yanzo said. "If they're here just to get out of prison, it's not going to work."

Inmates at Hartford House, one of 38 halfway houses in the state, are only allowed to leave the house for work, unless they behave well enough to earn a pass. There is a security guard at the desk where inmates are required to check in and out. The house staff calls each inmate's employer several times each shift to ensure they are at work. They live two to a room, do chores, are required to keep their rooms neat and attend programs. The house is operated by Windsor-based Community Solutions Inc., which has a contract with the state.

"I'll never forget this house," Yanzo said.

But some question whether community release programs are any more effective than prison.

A March 2005 Urban Institute study titled "Does Parole Work?" found that people on discretionary parole - granted by a parole board instead of a judge mandating it at sentencing - are only slightly less likely to be re-arrested than prisoners released without supervision. The study found that "overall, parole supervision has little effect on the re-arrest rates of released prisoners." The study did not address re-conviction rates, the measure that was used in the Connecticut study.

David Farabee, a research psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, does not disagree with community release - he believes the country overuses prison and it is beneficial to keep as many people in the community as possible - but he says that the supervision most states provide is lacking because the parole officers' caseloads are too high.

In Connecticut, a typical parole officer handles roughly 60 people, including parolees and inmates living in halfway houses or on transitional supervision and re-entry furlough. Connecticut's average caseload is lower than the national average, 73, according to one of Farabee's reports. But Farabee recommends caseloads of 15.

"If parole did what everyone thinks it does, it would be much more effective," he said. "Parole is done at the level of supervision that is so low it doesn't affect parolees' behavior. You can commit hundreds of offenses and you can be caught for one."

Farabee also says it's difficult for a parole board to determine whether an inmate has been rehabilitated based on behavior in a controlled environment like prison. "That has been one of the points of contention when people are arguing about discretionary release," he said.

And once they're outside of prison, monitoring these thousands of men and women can prove difficult.

Since 2003, when Lantz became commissioner, roughly 100 inmates on community release have disappeared and are considered to have escaped. Authorities still have not caught up with an additional 1,000 inmates who disappeared in the prior 39 years. Most of the escaped inmates are low-risk, prison officials say.

In the interview before the Cheshire killings, Lantz pointed out that 95 percent of all inmates get out, and she is faced with the daunting task of preparing such inmates for their release. A former warden in the system, Lantz felt there was a lack of re-entry services and drafted portions of a 111-page plan that was issued the month Komisarjevsky was released.

Lantz would not talk directly to a reporter about whether the Cheshire killings would dampen her efforts to focus on re-entry, but she released an e-mail statement:

"I am confident that from this tragedy will come further enhancements to Connecticut's criminal justice

system that will reinforce the safety of the public. The core reality, that most incarcerated offenders will eventually return to their communities, remains unchanged, as does our obligation to do all we can to appropriately prepare them for a successful reintegration into law abiding society."

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