

## Reduce the Prison Population in Your State

Your state has one of the largest populations of prisoners per capita in the United States. You spend 10% of your \$3 billion yearly budget just to maintain your growing prison system. One prisoner costs you \$30,000 per year to keep. Your task is to devise ways to reduce the prison population while doing each of the following:

- 1) Not endangering the public by releasing prisoners who should stay locked up
- 2) Not adding to your overall budget
- 3) Keeping the public happy

How will you do it? Remember that you are elected officials. Much of what you do will be judged on the next election day (two years from now). Prepare a plan of action and share it with the class.

Here is a list of alternative programs and their cost. You may choose from this list.

1. *Allowing early parole for non-violent offenders.* This means releasing people from prison early for good behavior, but continuing to monitor them and restrict their travel. This can save the state up to \$20 million, but it is unpopular and has shown that recidivism amongst these inmates is much higher than the average population (75% vs. 50%).
2. *Investing more in schools which are located in poor areas where much of the state's violent crime is committed.* This includes hiring new teachers, building new schools and creating new after-school programs for at-risk youths. It will add about 12% to your budget, but has the potential for much greater (but unknown) future benefit.
3. *Investing in more rehabilitation programs in the prisons.* This includes educational opportunities, psychological counseling and job skills development for current inmates. This will add 3% to your budget, but will not show any decrease in the prison population for several years (after the next election).
4. *Creating work release programs.* Such a program utilizes prisoners as manual labor for government construction projects. It will add less than 1% to the budget and could save up to 5%. Labor unions in the state are opposed to this idea, however, and they will have to be convinced it is a good idea.
5. *Legalizing marijuana.* This will drastically reduce the number of prisoners (by up to 10%) and can also add to the state budget at least \$20 million in taxes. But this is very unpopular with voters. A recent poll showed that only 15% of the population would support such a measure.
6. *Building new rehabilitation facilities exclusively for non-violent offenders.* Places like this are more boarding schools than prisons and isolates prisoners so that violent prisoners cannot influence non-violent ones. This will add 5% to your budget, but can show a decrease of up to 10% within 10 years.
7. *Eliminating the death penalty.* This will save the state up to 2% of its budget because it is vastly more expensive to keep inmates on death row than it is to incarcerate them for life. However, a recent poll showed that such a measure has the support of only 40% of the population. Young voters, however, support the measure by a factor of 85% to 15%.
8. *Providing tax breaks to businesses which hire ex-cons.* This would make it more attractive for state businesses to hire former prisoners. Such a measure could potentially reduce recidivism by up to 20%, but would also result in the loss of several million dollars in taxes. The long-term benefits are greater, though, as fewer and fewer ex-cons go back to prison. The tax breaks would mean that other services would have to be cut, however. Most vulnerable would be medical services for the poor and new road construction.