



**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SOUTH  
CAROLINA**

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“Legislators gang up on crime with new laws” reported the Post and Courier on June 13. The wide list of proposed lock-em-up type bills is state legislators’ answer to violent crime rates in South Carolina.

While the League of Women Voters of South Carolina decries violent crime and supports penalties for those who commit it, the LWVSC also believes the General Assembly’s focus is much too narrow. New, realistic legislation in other states like California and Washington is directed toward preventing crime by keeping people out of prison a second time, and we believe South Carolina legislators ought to look into the best practices in those and others states before calling their job done.

South Carolina has 55,242 people incarcerated, on probation or parole on an average day. This is an incarceration rate of 539 state inmates per 100,000 residents and it is ranked 8th in the nation.

The general public expects prisoners who have served their time to return to society as law abiding, taxpaying citizens. However, within 3 years of release, at least a third of former prisoners are rearrested. Clearly something is not being accomplished by punishment-focused prison policies.

The League of Women Voters wants all inmates to be required to participate in programs that prepare them for release, and we want those programs to be available in every South Carolina prison and jail. These programs include—at a minimum—mental and physical evaluations, GED classes, job training, anger management, domestic violence treatment, alcohol and drug treatment. It is no excuse for the state to say that inmates refuse to participate in the few programs that do exist; inmates are incarcerated and fully under state control. It is no excuse for the state to say programs cost too much; building new prisons costs much more. Post-incarceration, prisoner re-entry programs also are critical in curbing recidivism. It is a betrayal of public trust for the General Assembly to do little or nothing in this respect.

Our present system requires that probationers or parolees comply with many of the limited programs listed above at their own expense. Failure to do so subjects them to further prison time. In fact, most prisoners simply do not have the money or skills to comply.

While some South Carolina prisons do offer limited programs, the corrections system operates at such a low funding level that state prisons director Jon Ozmint says great effort is required for the prison system to simply stay afloat. South Carolina is among the bottom three in the nation in per-inmate funding, and it is the only correctional system in the nation funded below 1999 levels.

Especially under-funded is adequate addictions treatment for every inmate who needs it. This is particularly serious, since alcohol and drug use contribute enormously to the reasons why people go to prison in the first place.

It will take legislative action, or even judicial sentencing, to force the availability of adequate prisoner rehabilitation in South Carolina’s prisons and jails. It will certainly require additional funding. In any

event, all prisoners not given the death penalty or life without parole will one day return to our communities. It is clearly a matter of public security that released prisoners do not return to crime.

We believe it is the General Assembly's responsibility to give all inmates the tools to be meaningfully rehabilitated and require that all inmates participate. Simply locking up more people for longer sentences just prolongs the current policy of doing the same thing and expecting a different result.

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*The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. Membership in the League is open to men and women of all ages.*