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Prison overcrowding is a problem in many states, leading to early release programs and the construction of new prisons.

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Transcript
Overcrowding A Problem In Many State Prison Systems
TOM BROKAW, anchor:
On our Special Segment tonight, the subject is overcrowding; prison overcrowding, a condition that might prompt people to say, “So what? They’re getting what they deserve.” But as we see in this series of reports, prison overcrowding affects more than inmates.
BARBARA ROWAN reporting:
In Texas, there are 34,000 people in prison. The state has the nation’s largest prison system and also one of the most overcrowded, with three times as many inmates as it has cells. Last year it averaged one inmate admission every 39 minutes. Tent compounds had to be set up as a stop-gap measure after a federal judge last year said three inmates per cell was too many. Three thousand had been sleeping on floors. Prison officials blame the fact that so many convicts are in jail on Sunbelt growth and a crack-down on lawbreakers.
Mr. RICK HARTLEY (Texas Corrections Dept.): The people in Texas are getting sick and tired of being ripped off. They’re tired of being burglarized, they’re tired of being victimized and those same people make decisions in jury boxes.
ROWAN: But those same people who want felons behind bars don’t want prisons near their neighborhoods. And this has held the state back in its effort to build more prisons. The Texas prison system shut its doors to new prisoners on May 10th, causing an uproar from cramped municipal and county jails. Convicts are now being admitted only when other prisoners are released. Barbara Rowan, NBC News, Houston.
ROGER O’NEIL reporting:
In Michigan, 900 prisoners were released early last year because the prisons were overcrowded. They are overcrowded again this year and another early release has started. As a group, prison officials say the
convicts released early did only a little bit worse staying out of prison than regular parolees. One-hundred-seventeen of the 900 were arrested again for committing new crimes or for violating parole. William Page is back in prison, on another armed robbery charge.

WILLIAM PAGE: I just got to my drinking, I have a serious alcohol problem. And the first time I was in, I wasn’t given no help.

O’NEIL: Thirty-six-year-old James Westbrook was serving time for receiving stolen property when he got out early.

Unidentified Man: You say you have two jobs, James?

JAMES WESTBROOK: Yes, one I’m working at a restaurant as uh, maintenance, and the other’s at a barber shop as uh, labor.

O’NEIL: Westbrook was glad to get out early, but says that isn’t the reason he’s trying so hard to stay out of trouble.

WESTBROOK: It made me feel different, it made me feel an opportunity, but, you know, the rest of it I had to seek for myself.

O’NEIL: State officials say there’s been a two-tenths of one percent increase in crime caused by the prisoners who got out early.

BILL KIME (Deputy Corrections Dir.): I don’t know how you measure uh, a slight increase in crime rate against he kind of consequences you can have from overcrowding because ultimately overcrowding erupts in prison violence, it always has.

O’NEIL: And it did several times last year, with millions of dollars of property loss and dozens of injuries to prisoners and to guards. Michigan officials say the prisons are so overcrowded, they’ll probably have to release more prisoners later this year. And two more early releases are anticipated for next year. Roger O’Neil, NBC News, Jackson, Michigan.

MEREDITH LEWIS reporting:

Washington State is under a federal court order to do something about overcrowding in its prisons and it will cost the state plenty. Officials agree the cells are closet-size with two bunks squeezed in each one.

Prisoner 1: The cell’s are real small. The cell’s not even big enough for one person to live in, to be honest with you.

Prisoner 2: Everyone of these houses on the blocks are full. And they got people coming in every day.

LEWIS: So, Washington is building more space. Next to the old prison, a new one is being built for $39 million to house 500 men. Prisons are expensive because they have to withstand a lot, including attempts to break out of them.

But no matter what they do to juggle their budgets, some states find they have no money to build new prisons, and to get the financing, they must take the issue before the voters.

That’s what happened last May in Oregon, where the voters rejected a bond measure for new prisons by three-to-one. But in California, the voters decided to spend $495 million for new prisons. Officials insist that won’t be enough to ease overcrowding because some newly-enacted laws may mean sentencing thousands more to prison. Officials predict that another $800 million is needed in California soon.

Meredith Lewis, NBC News, Los Angeles.