

A look inside America's prisons

- America imprisons people at a higher rate than any other country.
- In 1972, 330,000 Americans were in prison or jail. Today, the number is 2 million.
- The cost of housing prisoners is approximately \$40 billion per year.
- Minnesota's prison population has increased 53 percent since 1990, the fifth-highest increase in the nation, behind Texas, North Carolina, Virginia and Mississippi.
- One in 14 black children has a parent in state or federal prison.
- About two-thirds of female inmates have children younger than 18.
- About 9 percent of women in prison are visited by their minor children.

Source: University of St. Thomas Sociology Department

To learn more

- www.ststephenscommunity.org; click on Parish Programs, then on Justice Education and Action, then on Criminal Justice Sunday.
- Faith-based CALL (Community Associated Life Links), (651) 647-9677; information and speakers on criminal justice, plus services for ex-offenders returning to the community.
- Federal FORUM (Females Organizing for Unity for Mothers), services for women re-entering the community, (651) 646-2483.
- BVM Restorative Justice Ministry, education and speakers; (651) 306-3668.

To volunteer

- Amicus, providing friends for inmates. (612) 348-8570 or www.amicususa.org.
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Greater Twin Cities. Mentor youth; (651) 789-2400.

— Kay Harvey

RELIGION

Today, many sermons will have same theme: criminal justice

BY KAY HARVEY
Pioneer Press

The message you hear from the pulpit today may be more about social justice than spirituality.

This morning, clergy in many Minnesota churches will appeal to their flocks to help fix a criminal-justice system some say is broken.

A group of advocates has declared this Criminal Justice Sunday to raise awareness of harsh conditions in prisons, courts and communities to which offenders eventually return. Behind the message are stories of juveniles and illegal immigrants locked up with violent offenders and mothers imprisoned far from home without personal contact with their young children or financial help for them.

"It is an ethical issue and societal issue rather than a religious issue," says Eileen Welsh, part of the group that birthed the awareness-raising campaign. "But it has become everybody's issue. What's happening is a war on our own people."

When offenders are released from jail or prison, many return with nothing to communities that shun ex-offenders as renters and employees, advocates say. Most take job skills with them but need training to adapt them to the job market. Some have mental illnesses and untreated chemical dependency. Many, seeing little hope for their futures, turn to crime again.

Jailed for 13 years on a first-time federal drug offense, Martha Taylor returned to Minneapolis a year ago. She needed full-

time work to pay for costly blood-pressure medicine, rent at her halfway house and installments on a \$10,000 fine tied to her crime. Trusting in honesty, she admitted on application forms for work as a cook, maid and telemarketer that she was a convicted felon.

"No one would hire me," says Taylor, 66. "My age and the felony worked against me even more than being an African-American woman. I felt like I was paying for my

"It is an ethical issue and societal issue rather than a religious issue."

EILEEN WELSH

crime over and over and over."

She is squeaking by with temporary jobs, including one at Federal FORUM, a St. Paul-based service that eases roadblocks for women coming out of federal prisons.

The service was created by Mary Gaines, also imprisoned for a first-time drug offense. Gaines endured another kind of prison, fed by distance and poverty. During eight years of incarceration, she never saw her three adolescent children.

Services she has created through Federal FORUM include bus trips for children to visit their mothers in federal prisons, along with help for "returnees" in finding jobs, housing, transportation and family stability.

"It's about embracing people coming back into the community," Gaines says. "Most of us want to make it. And it costs society a lot less to put services on this end than to lock people up again."

Criminal Justice Sunday originated with representatives of Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and St. Stephen's Community in Minneapolis. It is backed by a six-page statement, released in 2000 by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, calling for a new dialogue about the corrections system, improved outreach to victims and more humane treatment of convicted criminals.

"We believe that the current trend of more prisons and more executions, with too little education and drug treatment, will not really leave our communities safer," the statement says.

While the campaign began as a Catholic initiative, a letter to clergy in denominations throughout the state created "a groundswell of support," says Welsh of the advocate group. They hope Sunday's sermons will tweak people's interest in learning more about sentencing laws, restorative justice techniques, prison conditions and barriers offenders face when they return home.

"We hope to bring a greater awareness that, as taxpayers, we aren't getting the best bang for our buck," says Welsh, an educator who works in Minnesota prisons. "And that as a human family, we are all connected to each other."

Kay Harvey can be reached at kh Harvey@pioneerpress.com or (651) 228-5468.