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## LENGTH OF STAY IN PRISON, INMATE RECIDIVISM AND THE RECENT TREND IN REPORTED CRIME

*Since 1987 reported crime in North Carolina has increased at a rate three times the national average, and almost twice the regional average. Reported robbery alone has increased by 120%; a rate of increase higher than any other state in the nation.*

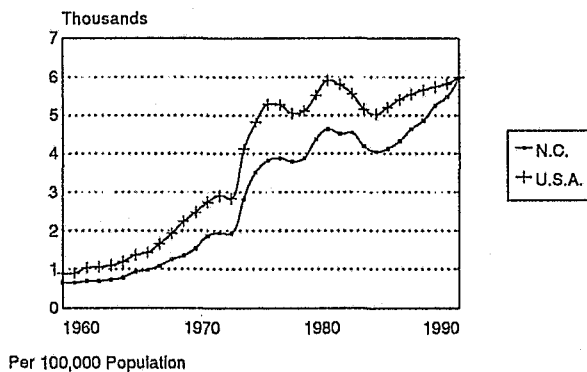
### INTRODUCTION

The 1991 reported crime figures recently released by the State Bureau of Investigation's Division of Criminal Information present a disturbing picture of the crime situation in our state. The surge in reported violent and property offenses that began in 1985 has continued unabated and in some cases has accelerated.

evident in Figure I. From about 1977 until 1987 the state and national crime trends seemed to parallel one another. Since 1987 however, reported crime in North Carolina has increased at a much faster rate than the national average. Figure II below illustrates the annual percentage change in reported crime for North Carolina and the rest of the nation since 1975. It is apparent that even though North Carolina's crime rate was lower than the national rate, and therefore its percentage base was smaller, the annual trends were very similar up until 1987. Since then, there has been a marked divergence in the relative trends.

Figure I

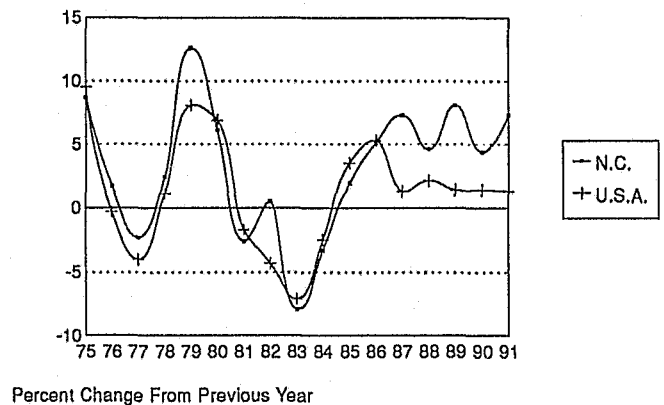
Reported Crime Rate for N.C. and the U.S.A.  
From 1958 To 1991



The reported crime rate per 100,000 population for North Carolina and the rest of the nation has historically followed a similar trend, as is

Figure II

Annual Trend In Reported Crime Rates  
For N.C. and the U.S.A.



Never before has the surge in crime been so much greater in North Carolina than the national and regional trends. For example, nationwide and in the rest of the South the reported violent crime rate per 100,000 population increased by 38% from 1985 to 1991.

In contrast, North Carolina recorded a 64% increase in its violent crime rate during that same period.

An even better indicator of the unparalleled rise in reported crime, relative to the other 49 states, that North Carolina has experienced in the past few years is the change in its crime rate ranking. *In 1986 North Carolina ranked 33rd in in reported crime rate among the 50 states. As of 1991 we have moved up to 17th - a jump of 16 places in just five years!*

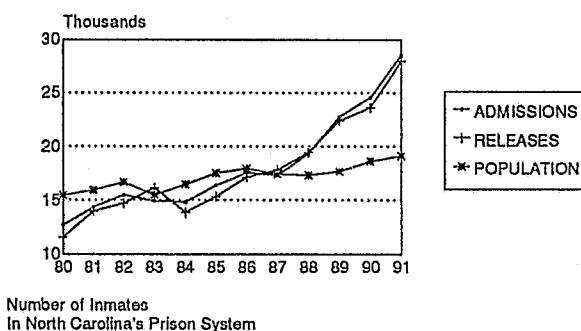
### WHY THE SURGE IN CRIME?

This raises the question of why North Carolina has experienced such an extraordinary increase in reported criminal offenses, well above the national and regional averages. Obviously many of the same factors that have initiated the increase in crime nationally, have also contributed to the rise in crime in North Carolina. The emergence and spread of crack cocaine, a highly addictive illicit drug, undoubtedly has contributed to the widespread increase in both property and violent offenses. Other socio-economic and demographic factors have also influenced the rising crime situation. However, all of these factors external to the criminal justice system do not adequately explain why North Carolina's crime rate is rising so much faster than the rest of the nation and the southern region of the country.

One possible explanation for the extraordinary surge in reported crime in North Carolina may be in the criminal justice system's response to the illicit drug problem. In 1987 the federal government significantly increased funding to the states for illicit drug interdiction and enforcement strategies. The massive infusion of federal funds, combined with an enhanced state and local law enforcement emphasis, significantly increased the number of arrests, causing notable rises in both criminal case filings and, more importantly, prison admissions as indicated in the Figure III.

Figure III

### Trend in Prison Admissions, Releases and Resident Population From 1980 To 1991



The trends in prison admissions, releases and the overall resident population, were consistent from 1980 to 1987. There were some minor exceptions; in 1984 prison releases declined suddenly. Since 1987 however, admissions and releases have increased substantially, both rising by 62%. Admissions for violent offenses rose by 46% and "property" admissions grew by 54% during that period. *The most significant increase in admissions came in the "narcotics and drugs" category which soared from 1,695 in 1987 up to 4,727 in 1991, an increase of 179%.*

In contrast the resident population has increased by only 10% since 1987. This was due to the imposition of a "cap" on the prison population by the North Carolina General Assembly, which was precipitated by the *Small v. Martin* law suit, filed in response to prison overcrowding.

### EROSION OF SENTENCING CREDIBILITY

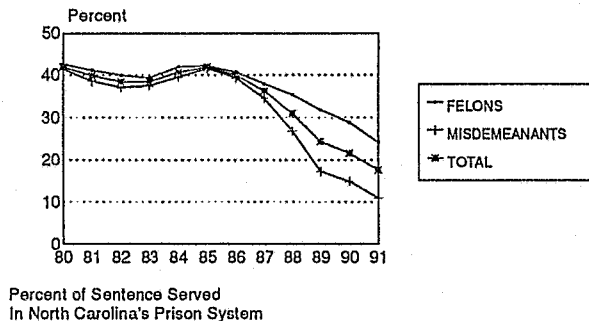
As a result of the substantial rise in admissions to prison, with the resident population held constant, releases from prison have necessarily risen in proportion to the level of admissions. As releases have increased dramatically, time served in prison has declined.

This is particularly evident when viewed as a proportion of the court imposed sentence, illustrated in the graph below.

From 1980 through 1986 the average time served in prison for convicted felons and misdemeanants was about 40% of their court imposed sentence. Since 1987 there has been a continuing, precipitous decline in the percent of time served in prison by felons and especially misdemeanants. In 1987 convicted felons served 40.7% of their court imposed sentence. By 1991 the figure had declined to 24.2%. For offenders convicted of a misdemeanor the portion of sentence imposed in the courtroom that was actually served fell from 39.4% in 1986, to 10.9% in 1991.

Figure IV

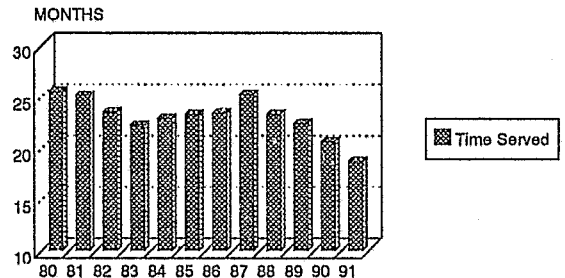
Trend in Time Served In Prison for Felons and Misdemeanants From 1980 To 1991



As illustrated in Figure V, from 1980 through 1989, the actual or real time served in prison by convicted felons fluctuated between 22 and 26 months. The peak years for average time served by felons were 1980 and 1987, when they were spending an average of 25.5 and 25.2 months in prison respectively. Since 1987 the time served in prison by convicted felons has declined steadily; down 26% or 6.5 months to an average of 18.7 months in 1991. ***In fact, convicted felons are currently serving less time in prison, on average, than at any time in the last twenty years.***

Figure V

Average Time Served in Prison by Convicted Felons From 1980 To 1991

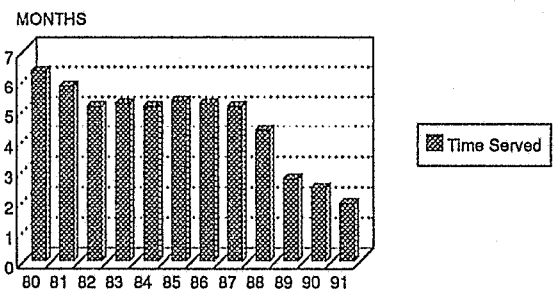


Source: Department of Corrections

The actual time served in prison by misdemeanants, as shown in Figure VI, remained fairly constant at about five months from 1982 through 1987. In 1988, prison time for misdemeanants began to decline precipitously from an average of 5.1 months in 1987 to 1.9 months in 1991, a decline of 63% in four years. ***As is the case with felons, convicted misdemeanants are now serving less time in prison, on average, than at any time in the last twenty years.***

Figure VI

Average Time Served in Prison by Convicted Misdemeanants From 1980 To 1991



Source: Department of Corrections

## INMATE RECIDIVISM

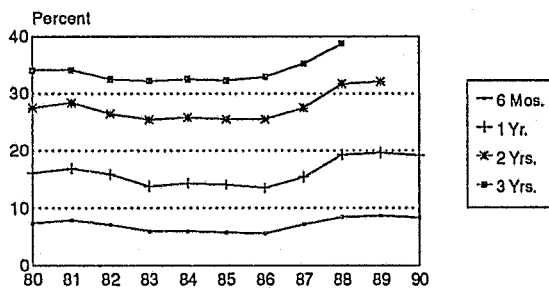
If the recent decline in time served in prison has lessened the deterrent and incapacitative effects of our correctional system, one would expect to see an increase in the number of inmates returning to prison. In fact, this is exactly what has occurred, especially since 1987.

The graph on the next page illustrates the trend in recidivism, as measured by the percent of inmates released in a given year, who return to prison within the above specified periods. Each line shows the cumulative trend of readmissions from six months to three years.

From 1980 to 1986 the recidivism or return to prison rate of inmates in North Carolina, declined slightly and then remained constant. In 1987 and 1988 the percent of inmates returning to prison increased sharply. *The proportion of inmates returning within one year of release, went from 13.5% in 1986 to 19.6% in 1989; which represents an increase in the "recidivism rate" of 45% over three years.*

Figure VII

Inmate Recidivism in North Carolina  
As Measured by Readmission to Prison  
From 1980 To 1990



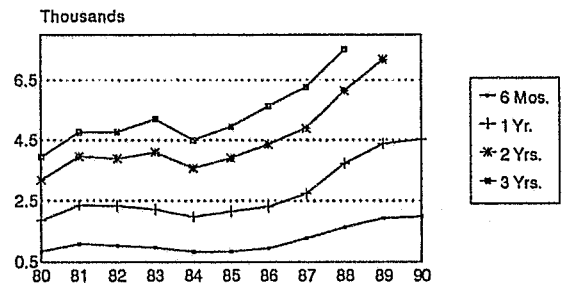
Percent of Inmates Returning to Prison  
Within Specified Time of Release

Whereas the above graph shows the trend in the percent of inmates returning to prison, the following graph depicts the number of inmates

released from prison in the identified year, who have returned to prison within the specified period. It graphically illustrates the combined effects of increasing recidivism rates with the soaring number of releases from prison.

Figure VIII

Inmate Recidivism in North Carolina  
As Measured by Readmission to Prison  
From 1980 To 1990



Number of Inmates Returning to Prison  
Within Specified Time of Release

For example, in 1984 there were approximately 1,900 inmates released from prison, who returned to prison within one year. By 1990 that number had increased by 128%, with over 4,500 inmates being released only to be reincarcerated within one year. It should be noted, that "return to prison" is a very conservative measure of recidivism. The actual number of inmates who committed another offense within one year of release would probably exceed 6,000. That is not to mention the actual number of offenses that might be committed by a chronic offender before he is rearrested and returned to prison.

A survey of prison inmates from the states of California, Michigan and Texas, conducted by the Rand Corporation in 1982, indicated that half of the offenders committed fewer than 15 crimes per year. However, 10 percent of the inmates surveyed committed over 600 offenses per year. The average for all inmates surveyed was between 187 and 287 offenses per year.

## CONCLUSION

ince 1987 North Carolina has experienced an extraordinary rise in reported crime, greatly exceeding the national trend for the first time since accurate figures were maintained. There are many socio-economic and demographic factors that have contributed to the overall rise in crime both in this state and across the country. This obviously includes the emergence of the highly addictive, and relatively inexpensive, illicit drug, crack cocaine.

However, there would appear to be something particular to North Carolina that would cause our reported crime rate to rise at a much faster rate than the rest of the country. The unparalleled jump in our national ranking for reported crime, from 33rd in 1986 to 17th in 1991, indicates something unique to North Carolina has occurred that is exacerbating the crime problem. If we had made similar "progress" in our SAT scores, we would be justifiably praising the great improvements made in our educational system. Accordingly, our criminal justice system must share some of the responsibility for the decline in public safety, relative to the other states, as measured by our crime rate ranking.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Government in Chapel Hill, for the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission, found that offenders sentenced to prison are more likely to be rearrested than similar offenders who are not given active terms. This was true even when those factors that are most likely to predict recidivism, i.e., original offense, age and prior record of the offender, were held constant in comparing the different offender groups.

The substantial rise in arrests and admissions to prison, in part due to the federal, state and local crackdown on illicit drugs, has put more people into the correctional system at a time when the overall resident population has been "capped" by legislative mandate. Accordingly, the Parole Commission has been compelled to release one inmate for every new one that is admitted. Unfortunately, given the aforementioned trend in recidivism, the offender being released is

probably a greater threat to public safety than similar offenders who were released from prison five years ago.

This may be due to the significant decline in the amount of active time an offender serves, both in real time and as a proportion of the courtroom sentence given by the judge. The credibility of an active sentence has eroded to the point that it is commonplace for convicted offenders to turn down probation for an active sentence. This is because the conditions attached to probation, e.g., community service, restitution, intensive supervision, etc., are perceived as a greater burden and more punitive than serving a relatively short active term in prison.

In essence the criminal justice system in North Carolina has been "getting tough on crime" with one hand, while the other hand is steadily releasing criminals. This mixed message may actually be exacerbating the crime problem by negatively reinforcing deviant behavior on the streets of North Carolina.

We have moved—please note  
our new address and phone  
number.

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**SYSTEMSTATS**  
A Publication of  
**The Criminal Justice Analysis Center**  
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The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is to serve, along with its adjunct committee, as the chief advisory board to the Governor and to the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control & Public Safety on matters pertaining to the criminal justice system. The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please write to us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.

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