



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

PROBATION AND PAROLE

A vote for parole

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Notwithstanding the unfair rush to judgment by some politicians in the immediate aftermath of the fatal shooting of a Woburn police officer at the hands of a paroled repeat offender, Governor Deval Patrick, after receiving a report on the circumstances surrounding the case, did the only thing he could to begin to restore public confidence in the parole system. Yet, accepting the resignations of five board members who voted to release parolee Dominic Cinelli and appointing an exceptionally talented and well-respected professional like Josh Wall to serve as parole board chair are only the initial steps needed to resolve the situation.

The tragic outcome of Cinelli's parole release was, of course, a painful loss for the slain officer's family and friends as well as colleagues and community. It was also a major public relations debacle for a critically important and long-standing criminal justice process in which there was rather little support in the first place. It would be unfortunate if in moving forward the new board adopted Nancy Reagan's famous mantra, just say no. □ Our entire sentencing structure, which tends to be predicated on the idea of letting the punishment fit the worst criminal □ requires the flexibility provided by the parole process.

Given the wholesale changes taking place at the Massachusetts Parole Board, this is an appropriate time to implement other reforms and improvements that go well beyond just personnel moves. Other steps that should be considered are:

- Expanding the size of the parole board to handle its huge caseload
- Increasing the staffing and resources for parole officers
- Upgrading rehabilitative, vocational and educational programming
- Improving re-entry and aftercare programs for the support and supervision of parolees
- Providing financial incentives for private employers to hire parolees

All of these initiatives come with a price tag, of course. However, the long-run cost, monetary and otherwise, is far less than that of either warehousing prisoners well past the point where they pose a risk to public safety or releasing prisoners without adequate support to ensure a smooth and successful transition back to free society.

Aside from first-degree murderers whose life sentences come without a parole option, there are countless others -- second-degree murderers and repeat offenders -- who are serving life sentences with parole

eligibility. Despite the public's skepticism and current lack of confidence in the parole process, it would not serve us well if we were to place a virtual freeze on parole, and turn life with the possibility of parole into life with the illusion of parole.