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California's county jails struggle to house influx of state prisoners

Overcrowding forces the early release of some county jail inmates because of the so-called prisoner realignment. Another alternative is electronic monitoring of some low-level offenders.

By Richard Winton and Andrew Blankstein, Los Angeles Times

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The early release of inmates in some parts of California is accelerating as officials at county jails struggle to accommodate state prisoners flowing into their facilities.

The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department planned to begin releasing about 150 inmates Friday because of overcrowding in county jails.

Sheriff Rod Hoops has decided to release the inmates, mostly parole violators or those convicted of nonviolent crimes, over the next five days. The inmates must have served at least half of their sentence, and have less than 30 days remaining on their sentence.

The move is a result of a U.S. Supreme Court decision requiring the state to lower its prison population by 30,000. To meet the mandate, those convicted of certain crimes who until now served their sentences in state prison now must serve their time in a county jail. No inmates are being moved from state prisons to county jails. But as these people are sentenced, they will be sent to a county jail rather than state prison.

San Bernardino is believed to be the largest county to start early releases since the so-called prisoner realignment began. Kern County made a similar move last month.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is hoping to deal with the influx of state prisoners by developing alternatives to custody — such as electronic monitoring — for low-risk offenders awaiting trial.

L.A. County's jails are expected to house as many as 8,000 state prisoners by mid-2012. Los Angeles County prosecutors said in a report that the numbers could fill up the jails as early as this month.

But sheriff's officials said they don't expect capacity to be reached until summer at the earliest.

"I don't know what the turning point is going to be, but I don't think the sky is going to fall," said Los Angeles County Sheriff's Chief Alex Yim. "We are looking for a measured amount of

growth in the jail population. So we are ramping up programs like electronic monitoring and work release now."

Up until now, San Bernardino County managed to keep its jails from overcrowding through work release and other programs. But with the system rapidly approaching capacity, the sheriff opted to make more room for new arrestees and higher-priority inmates.

The parole violators being released will have their criminal and custody history examined, and they will be placed under the supervision of state parole officers.

Some counties, including Los Angeles, are under court order to prevent jail overcrowding. So officials said that some inmates will be released to make way for the state prisoners.

Orange County Sheriff Sandra Hutchens has warned that none of the alternatives are ideal. Hutchens said, for example, that she's unsure how many inmates can be trusted to serve time wearing GPS-monitored bracelets.

So far, some counties — including Los Angeles, Orange and San Bernardino — have reported receiving significantly more state prisoners from courts than the state projected.

State officials and some sheriffs believe the higher-than-projected number of state prisoners being sent to jails has occurred in part because defense attorneys waited until realignment took effect to settle their clients' cases. By doing that, the attorneys were assured that their clients would get jail time instead of prison time.