

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
June 8, 2006

Statement of U.S. Senator Russell D. Feingold
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Corrections and Rehabilitation
Hearing on "The Findings and Recommendations of the
Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons"
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Mr. Chairman, I am pleased that we are hearing from members of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, to bring to our attention an issue that has been somewhat hidden from the public eye - the conditions of confinement in our nation's correctional facilities. This subject has not received much attention in recent years, but it is very important. The effects of poor prison conditions extend far beyond the prison walls, and reach into many aspects of our society.

The Commission's report, released today, provides a valuable and candid look at the current state of our nation's jails and prisons, identifying a variety of structural and administrative problems within our corrections system. It pinpoints factors that have greatly contributed to the level of violence in prisons, such as prison overcrowding, the lack of funding for rehabilitation programs and an associated lack of outlets for productive activities. Prison officials also face health care problems, as the prison population has a higher rate of disease than the general public, yet prisons often have little funding for correctional health care systems. The report also points to the lack of independent oversight mechanisms for many prisons and jails, and the lack of nationwide data and reporting about prison conditions.

The 15-month study conducted by the Commission makes innovative yet viable recommendations for prison reform that Congress should seriously consider. Of course, we must ensure that those who commit crimes are appropriately punished. But prison does not have to be a place where violence is a way of life, one where inmates and staff alike are constantly fearful for their own safety. It is in our interests as a society both to provide incarcerated individuals with the rehabilitation tools that will allow them to emerge from prison without returning to crime, and to provide correctional professionals with the training, staffing levels and other resources they need to do their jobs.

The comprehensive findings and recommendations in this report are due in large part to the accomplished professionals who make up the Commission itself, and I commend them for their dedication. I also want to recognize the contribution of Alex Busansky, the Commission's executive director, who previously served as a detailee from the Justice Department to my Judiciary Committee staff. The Commission is very lucky to have him as its executive director.

Mr. Chairman, the issue of prisoner abuse and safety deserves our attention, and I appreciate your willingness to focus attention on this important new report. Thank you.