



North Carolina to Release Dangerous Convicts under Old Law

By Christine Cristiano

Under the provisions of a decade old law, 20 violent rapists and murderers who are presently serving life sentences will be released from prisons across North Carolina later this month. According to the old law that created in the 1970's, a life sentence is defined as only 80 years in length. Meanwhile, state officials are scrambling trying to figure out how they can legally detain these 'dangerous' inmates and any future inmates behind bars who have been denied parole for decades due to the severity of their crimes.



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In a statement, Governor Beverly Perdue said that she is appalled "that the state of North Carolina

is being forced to release prisoners who have committed the most heinous of crimes, without any review of their cases." All of the convicts but one was convicted of murder or rape, the 20th convict is incarcerated for second degree burglary, and assault with intent to commit rape.

Bobby Bowen, a convicted criminal who is serving a life sentence in one of the state's prison, believes that the 1974 law clearly defines a life sentence being for the duration of 80 years and he further argues that the law combined with credits for good behaviour equates to the completion of his life sentence and he should now be released. In 1975, Bowen was convicted of two killings in Cumberland County and was initially sentenced to death. Later, the Supreme Court changed their sentence and removed Bowen from death. In exchange, Bowen received concurrent life sentences, and has sought but been denied parole since 1987. Most of the prisoners are in now in their 50's and 60's and are imprisoned for murder, sex offenses, and rape; seven have done time on death row.

Last year, The Court of Appeals took Bowen's side, however, earlier this month the North Carolina Supreme Court rejected the state's appeal after a lawyer from the attorney general's office argued that "the 80 years likely was supposed to determine when somebody would be eligible for parole."

According to the 1970's statute which was in effect for several years, "a sentence of life imprisonment shall be considered as a sentence of imprisonment for a term of 80 years in the state's prison."

In a statement, Thomas Bennett, Executive Director of the North Carolina Victim Assistance Network, advocates that releasing the prisoners is dangerous, and commented that "this is terrible. This is a disaster. This is another example of victims not receiving consideration in the way the system works."

Bennett added that "this will open new wounds and re-traumatize crime victims .These are bad actors. These are not people we want on the streets."

Noelle Talley, spokesperson for Attorney Roy Cooper said that "our lawyers have argued just about everything they can think of to keep this from happening. The Supreme Court has the final say."

The North Carolina Supreme Court was not successful in overturning the states Court of Appeal's decision which re-examined life sentences for crimes committed during the 1970's. Consequently the duration of life sentences imposed before 1981 are cut in half and sentences for crimes committed in 1970s were reduced by 40 years.

The first 20 inmates are slated for release at the end of October, and another 10 inmates are expected to be released under the new guidelines over the next few years.

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